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# Off the Grid

Matthew Owen Buffington  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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Off the Grid

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

Matthew Owen Buffington  
Macalester College  
Bachelor of Arts in Geography and Urban Studies, 2004

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Dylan DeWitt, M.F.A.  
Thesis Director

---

Lynn Jacobs, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

David Chioffi, M.A.  
Committee Member

---

Kristin Musgnug, M.F.A.  
Committee Member

---

Sean Morrissey, M.F.A.  
Committee Member

## **Abstract**

*Off the Grid* explores the messy relationship between public and private perceptions of our urban spaces, especially the tensions created when lived experience runs up against the physical and conceptual networks of cities: street grids, construction tape, and property lines. Incorporating different modes of spatial representation, from cartographic diagrams to isometric illustrations and Renaissance perspectives, this exhibition examines the role drawing plays in how we conceptualize the divisions and definitions of everyday space. The drawings engage the often overlooked detritus of city life, from layers of old graffiti to overgrown dirt piles and unmoored electrical wiring, that complicate our understanding of how urban space is actually used. Drawn from the spaces surrounding the artist's daily routine, *Off the Grid* investigates the potential of a subjective cartography to tell a more complete story about the places we inhabit.

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## *INTRODUCTION*

"That's another thing we've learned from your Nation," said Mein Herr, "map-making. But we've carried it much further than you. What do you consider the largest map that would be really useful?"

"About six inches to the mile."

"Only six inches!" exclaimed Mein Herr. "We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!"

"Have you used it much?" I enquired.

"It has never been spread out, yet," said Mein Herr: "the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well."

- From "Sylvie and Bruno Concluded" by Lewis Carroll, first published in 1893.<sup>1</sup>

In his fictional conversation from *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, Lewis Carroll highlights a dilemma that has plagued cartographers, city planners, architects, and artists alike; that our ability to communicate complex spatial ideas through visual means is directly correlated to the scale of our picture plane.<sup>2</sup> The geographers in Mein Herr's story come to a solution that is, of course, absurd, but the problem is real. Representations of space cannot show everything so, instead, they must rely upon visual systems to describe the spaces that surround us. These systems—the lines of architecture, the shapes of cartography, the structure of diagrams, the linear perspective of observational drawing—have proven to be effective in communicating complex spatial ideas in a diverse range of applications, from the wiring plan of a McDonald's to

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<sup>1</sup>Carroll, Lewis, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (Project Gutenberg, 1894), chapter 10, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/48795>

<sup>2</sup> Carroll's idea of a map created to the same scale as the land itself was later adopted by Jorge Luis Borges in his short story, "On Exactitude in Science." Both anecdotes highlight the absurdity of the solution, but more tellingly, both imply that the enterprise turns the people against the whole business of cartography: "In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography."

Borges, Jorge Luis, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 325.

a survey of an archaeological dig. These maps, plans, and diagrams have become increasingly more precise and complex, and accordingly, we have come to rely upon them as objective authorities on spatial matters. They divide space through the creation of boundaries. They define spaces, by giving them names or classifying them into groups, and they tell us how these spaces should be used. These spatial representations pervade the shared understandings of space that intersect our politics, society, identity, and everyday life.

There are moments, though, when these public perceptions of how city space is divided, defined, and used come into tension with our own experiences of living in these spaces. In *Off the Grid*, I investigate this gap between lived experience and conceptual understanding of everyday places through a drawing process that encompasses the role of geographer and artist. As a geographer in the field, I am going out to see how everyday space is constructed by humans, and subsequently, the way these spaces inform our behavior.<sup>3</sup> As an artist in his studio, I am exploring how these spaces can be represented in image, and what meanings are communicated by these representations. Both geographers and artists take seriously the role individual experience plays in spatial understanding, and in this work, I am using both roles to create a subjective cartography of spaces that surround me.

A contemporary precedent exists for taking on this dual role of geographer and artist. In 2002, artist Trevor Paglen created the term “experimental geographer” to outline the potential for an art practice that is aware of its spatial production.<sup>4</sup> Paglen does not call for more artists to make work *about* space (after all, most of art history deals in some way with representations of

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<sup>3</sup> My undergraduate degree was in Geography and Urban Studies. My interests have remained spatial, even as they have turned to the concerns of contemporary art.

<sup>4</sup> Paglen, Trevor, “Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space,” *Critical Landscapes*, ed. Emily Eliza Scott and Kristen Swenson (University of California Press, 2015), 34-42.

space). Instead, he is asking artists to consider how the work they produce, whether a painting or a performance, is inseparable from the production of all the spaces that surround it.<sup>5</sup> The work in *Off the Grid* comes out of this idea. The drawings in the exhibition are not about a critique of geography, but rather about creating my own geography to find new ways of telling the stories of everyday places.

I have divided this thesis into three chapters. In *Mapping a Point of View*, I examine the visual language of isometric projection and why its particular point of view is important to establishing a perspective of the world that is both expansive and intimate. Taking us out of the studio and into the streets, *Walking and Mapping* explores the significance of walking in my work. I also look at how walking has played a role in spatial thinking for artists and theorists, and how their thinking can be found in my own process. In *The Material World*, I consider the objects that make up the worlds that I created in *Off the Grid*; what can everyday objects and their relationship to their surrounding environments tell us about our subjective understanding of our spaces and places?

### ***MAPPING A POINT OF VIEW***

Public understandings of space—the shared concepts that we use to communicate ideas both of space (such as distance, scale, and orientation) and of place (from communal histories to cultural meaning)—take many visual forms including varieties of maps, architectural renderings, urban development plans, and schematics. These representations of space position the viewer’s perspective in specific ways, for specific purposes. The reasons are often practical. The property lines of a city plat map are most accurate when viewed looking straight down and perpendicular

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

from the ground. An architect might render a building's facade using linear perspective to show how the building will look from the viewpoint of a passerby.

At the same time, the perspective systems they use often carry conceptual ideas about how to view the world. That same plat map views the city through the lens of ownership by breaking the world into the rectilinear forms of property. Of course, this view of a city is not inherently wrong, or even misleading, just as it is not wrong to represent the city through other informational systems like street maps or GIS data. Rather, as geographers and artists alike have brought to our attention, informational drawing uses viewpoint (in the perspectival sense) as a means of conveying a point of view (in the intellectual sense) about the world, and this point of view is often impersonal in approach and institutional in intention.

In his chapter "Walking in the City," from his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau argues that our desire to see the totality of an urban space (from the top of a skyscraper or the camera on a drone, for example) is directly related to our wish to impose order and control on the chaotic, everyday practices that happen on the streets of a modern city.<sup>6</sup> To Certeau, our attempts to represent the city from an objective viewpoint, at a distance from actual human behavior, is a dehumanizing act that conceptualizes the city as a site for production rather than human interaction. Seeing becomes a political and ideological act. What gets left out of this totalizing view of the city, he argues, are urban practices that contradict the utopian ideal of a capitalist city, from homelessness to political protests.<sup>7</sup> It is only when we interact with the city on the level of the street, by actually walking through the city, can we begin to see the city as a site of communal superstitions, "fragmentary and inward-turning histories," and memories.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> de Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91-110.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 106-110.



One of the questions I am asking in the work of *Off the Grid* is whether it is possible to subvert this top down view of a city, of the sort that Certeau opposes, to tell a more subjective story about the spaces we inhabit? I use an isometric perspective as a framework to show an expansive vision of a city as filtered through my own experiences and practices within the places that surround me. In the translation between viewpoints, from the experiential to the diagrammatic, I privilege my own hierarchies of urban typologies and practices over traditional markers of city spaces like street grids and property lines. The isometric grid gives me an easily understood structure that I can plug into my subjective interpretations of urban space. It is a point of view that is by its very nature impersonal (as in it cannot be replicated with human sight), but as I will discuss below, its expansive structure allows for narrative conventions, like the passage of time, that can speak directly to subjective experience.

A subset of axonometric projection, isometric projection is a perspective system that is skewed in such a way as to allow the viewer to see multiple sides of objects in space without altering the scale of any one form. Because the scale is consistent throughout the picture plane, isometric does not use converging lines to describe space. Instead, orthogonal lines within isometric always remain parallel, which means there is no horizon in an isometric illustration. Its field of view is theoretically boundless, limited only by the edges of the page. Free from the constraints of the cone of vision and curvature of the Earth, it is truly a god's eye view—a totality of vision. It is this function, its freedom from the limitations of actual sight, that allows isometric to be read as a more objective representation of objects in space. After all, a human point of view is inherently subjective.

Isometric projection's lack of converging lines also makes it useful for other applications. Because it maintains a consistent scale throughout the picture plane, it is a projection often used in technical drawing and architecture. In these uses, isometric projection communicates spatial

relationships more easily than perspectives that mimic human sight. This might account for why we are able to read it so well, even though its description of space is quite different to how we see space. In turn, the isometric images that come out of these fields, that we become familiar with at an early age, continue to promote it as a view that is inherently objective and empirical.

At the same time, isometric projection's expansive view of the world gives it a narrative potential that might explain why it shows up in both art history and pop culture. East Asian painters and printmakers often used oblique perspectives in their landscapes. In the 16th century Japanese painting *Sights in and around Kyoto*, for example, the artist shows us a bustling city scene made up of thousands of Kyoto residents and travelers going through the routines of their day (Figure 1). Because of the oblique perspective, we can see a number of different narratives take place simultaneously, in one image. At the bottom of the top right panel, a parade is snaking its way through a densely-packed street, while in the panel to its left, a group sits munching on a melon seemingly oblivious to the clamor a few streets down. The perspective allows a single representation to tell multiple narratives at once that, separated by delicate clouds of gold leaf, combine to tell a larger story about city life in 16th century Japan.

By focusing on the activity of its streets, *Sights in and around Kyoto* also speaks to both mobility and time. Because of the vast scale of the image, the viewer must mimic the action of walking through the city streets as they move their eyes through the crowds and around buildings. Like a page of a graphic novel, action unfolds rather than being presented in a single snapshot, suggesting that these scenes are in the process of developing. Unlike a novel, though, the narrative is not necessarily linear. Instead, the perspective gives us a viewpoint that allows the viewer to follow their own path through the city streets. The vignettes evolve in different sequences every time we view the piece. Time exists in the painting but that time is nebulous and ever present.

Centuries after *Sights in and around Kyoto*, early video game developers began using isometric projection for many of the same reasons. These games, from *Legend of Zelda* (1986) to the *The Sims* (2000), took advantage of isometric projection's unique ability to show an expanded field that has just enough depth in which action could believably still take place. This view allows for viewer to see the larger landscape as events are taking place. Much like in *Sights in and Around Kyoto*, the map no longer exists separately from the narrative. Isometric drawing gives the viewer permission to journey through cartographic space. It reminds us that we exist, but in a larger world. It is because of this combination of narrative and cartographic potential that I decided to employ isometric projection in *Off the Grid*. The piece *A Survey of Fayetteville Alleyways in Five Sections*, for example, takes it one step further by breaking the isometric grid into separate table tops (Figure 2). The viewer must physically travel around the drawings as they follow the surface of the street.

Equally important to my drawings in *Off the Grid* is isometric projection's democratizing nature. Because the scale remains consistent throughout the whole picture plane, every line has the potential to carry the same importance. Linear perspective, by contrast, creates hierarchies of scale. The visual weight of forms diminishes as they recede into the horizon. In *Off the Grid*, the democratic function of isometric allows me to choose my own visual hierarchies. In a detail from *South Washington Home, Across from the Church of Christ*, for example, a fan sits upon a dining room chair next to an unmade bed (Figure 3). I gave it more visual weight than the wall that encloses the room, because in my telling, the use of this chair and fan gives a better indication of how the space is actually used versus the walls that surround it.

At the same time, the isometric view of the world distances us from the subjective experience of imagining ourselves in the actual space. It is a view we can never actually see in real life, because it contradicts how human sight works. This is a virtue for an artist like Paul

Noble, who uses the dissociative nature of isometric to enhance the otherworldliness of his vast, dystopian landscapes (Figure 4). But it poses a specific challenge to my own project, in which I am trying to bring subjective experience into a public representation of space.

Other artists have found solutions to this problem. In panels of his graphic novel *Buildings*, Chris Ware uses the spatial storytelling potential of isometric projection to broaden the world outside the character's personal actions.<sup>9</sup> This distance situates his characters in the context of all the other people who are living around them, all of whom have their own worries, problems, routines, and disappointments. The effect may speak to the alienation of modern living, but it is also empathetic. While the story highlights how small, and seemingly insignificant, our individual stories are to the larger narrative of the world, the fact that the work takes the time to tell such a story is a nod to the importance of its subject. Ware uses the narrative potential of an impersonal drawing system to create a portrait the story of a place that is vast in scope but intimate in meaning.

I also approached the drawings in *Off the Grid* with empathy in mind, although it is a sympathy extended more towards the places we inhabit than the people who live in them. The places I chose to include are spaces, like the characters in Ware's comics, that are afterthoughts in the larger narrative of a city. These are places—my home, a construction site, the alleyways—that are not exactly ignored, but rather, generalized into generic markers of city space. My home is a residential dwelling, one among many others, but it also has its own history that is infused with the experiences and memories of its many residents. Our surroundings speak of our stories as much as our actions, they speak of how we inhabit, interact, and walk through the world. Which brings us to a specific action woven through *Off the Grid*, the act of walking.

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<sup>9</sup> Ware, F.C., *The ACME Novelty Library, Number 18* (Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2007).

## ***WALKING AND MAPPING***

I built the drawings in *Off the Grid* out of actual experience, meaning that the process started with my active engagement with the spaces they depict. In fact, the impetus for the work comes directly from walking. Living in the small city of Fayetteville, Arkansas, walking has been my main means of transportation. Because of this, I experience the city at a walker's pace. The slow, steady, and repetitive (I often am walking to and from the same destinations) act of walking allows for a more contemplative experience of the surrounding environment that engages senses beyond just mere vision. There are things to see, of course, but also barriers to walk around, smells to avoid, and snippets of conversation to hear. These experiences can be singular (a lawn strewn with a person's belongings when a lover's quarrel suddenly becomes public, for example), or a recurring occurrence that turns into a direct association (the slight sewage smell in front of the burrito place which I attempt to avoid by crossing the street at the light before). When all added together, these experiences form a spatial understanding of my environment that, whether consciously or not, imbues meaning onto the place I walk through and live in. In other words, in my brain resides a sensory map of Fayetteville that is complex in its layers, often contradictory, and by its very nature, incomplete. The drawings in *Off the Grid* are attempts at visualizing this cognitive map, at finding a way to represent the subjective experience of walking through space.

Writers, artists, historians, scientists, theorists and others have investigated the complexity hidden behind the deceptively simple human activity of walking. Walking may be our most common means of getting from point A to point B, but it plays many roles besides transportation. Christian pilgrimages, Aboriginal walkabouts, and the Hajj are all examples of the walk serving a religious function. In history, we remember famous walks that speak to forced

migrations (the Trail of Tears), war (the Bataan Death March), and political struggle (the March on Washington). As an activity, walking has often been paired with the act of thinking. In her book about walking, *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit writes about the longstanding connection made between philosophical musing and walking, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>10</sup> Solnit argues that, especially for Rousseau, the act of walking through city streets leads to a improvisational thinking that comes from random encounters with people and places. It is a stream-of-conscious means of seeing the world that is freed from the constraints of normal discourse.<sup>11</sup> Today, magazines and websites often tie walking to the practice of mindfulness (that idealized, and seemingly impossible to reach, state-of-mind that our distraction prone society continually obsesses over).

Walking, then, is both a functional and meaningful action, and its meaning is intrinsically connected to the space in which it takes place. In the twentieth century, artists have played a key role in pointing to the role walking plays in expanding our spatial understanding of the urban environment. One strategy to induce this perceptual awakening was to separate the action from the function of transporting oneself between locations. In the 1920's, André Breton, Louis Aragon, and others associated with the Surrealist movement included the mindless stroll in its arsenal of methods to tap into the unconscious.<sup>12</sup> The 1950's French artist collective, the Letterist International, turned the aimless drifting through the streets into a political act in a practice they called the *dérive* (or drift). These *dérives* were designed to be random in their design, and in the resulting disorientation, their participants felt they would be better in tuned to picking up the

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<sup>10</sup> Solnit, Rebecca, *Wanderlust*, (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2000), 13-29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-22.

<sup>12</sup> O'Rourke, Karen, *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013) 8.

subtle variation in the “psychic atmospheres” that distinguished one city space from another.<sup>13</sup> In this way, they hoped that random encounters with urban spaces would help them see through the institutional and cultural blinders that keep us from a deeper understanding of how our cities function.

Other artists have explicitly connected the act of walking to that of art making. Most famously, Richard Long created *A Line Made by Walking* (1967) in which the artist created a literal line in space by walking in a straight line through a field. Since Long, contemporary works like Jeremy Wood’s GPS drawings of his travels through London have played with the idea that the body’s movements through space is, itself, a form of drawing (Figure 5).<sup>14</sup> Of course, this form of drawing is also a form of cartography. These artists use their bodies to create their own subjective geographies, and in the process, they call attention to the idea that how we conceive of space is directly connected to our movement through it. Karen O’Rourke makes this connection explicit in her book, *Walking and Mapping*, in which she details how a number of contemporary artists translate the subjective experience of walking into the objective world of mapping as a means of making sense of how to understand an individual's place in a complex, dynamic system.<sup>15</sup> It is an idea that I am familiar with from my previous studies in human geography, a discipline that often requires extensive time in the field observing and taking notes on everything you encounter.

It is probably for this reason that the walk plays an important practical and conceptual role in my own work. The isometric system that I use to map out the space in these drawings displays the world from a Superman-flying-over-the-city view. Without access to a helicopter, or

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 123-152.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., xvii-xx.

the legal allowances to fly my own drone, my only option for gathering the necessary information to construct the drawing is to continuously inhabit the spaces on the ground. Which, of course, is the point; in order to map out personal understandings of a place, one must first experience it. And continue to experience it, again and again. For this reason, the places I chose to investigate in *Off the Grid* are ones that I could continue to interact with on a daily basis; the construction site I walk by on my way to work, the alleyways I pass through on my way to buy a coffee, my own home. The process of mapping and walking, then, could happen convergently, and both could inform each other. I built the drawing *South Street Construction Site*, for example, over a period of several months, during which I walked by the site daily on my way to and from home. Each time I walked by the site, I would observe changes in the relationship between objects, and document (through photography or notes) new materials and markings that I could incorporate into the drawing (Figure 6).

This process allowed for an accumulation of experiences to form into a visual representation that suggests different moments of time existing in a static image. I approached the drawings as if they were palimpsests; informational works that accumulate new information over time, while leaving traces of previous marks and images.<sup>16</sup> I chose watercolor as a means of coloring the work because the transparency allows for some of those ghostly images to come through, while at the same time, allowing me to draw over the paint.<sup>17</sup> There are also areas that I

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<sup>16</sup> This idea of the drawing as a palimpsest comes from an interest in Renaissance city portraits. As scholar Jessica Maier points out, these early representations of 16th and 17th century cities were liberally constructed from surveys, studies, and a healthy dose of imagination. While these techniques may not have led to the most accurate depictions of the city, they did add a dimension of time into the work that helped create the impression of a “living image of a city.” It is a strategy I attempt to employ in *Off the Grid*.

Maier, Jessica, “A “True Likeness”: The Renaissance City Portrait”, *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Fall 2012), 711-752.

<sup>17</sup> I also associate watercolor with the act of sketching. It privileges immediacy over precision, which may be why it is often used in plein air paintings of natural scenes. It is a relationship that



did not color or fully render. These moments are meant to suggest that, as palimpsests, these maps are always open to be reworked and added onto. Also, the grid itself, which I render in non-photo blue, often remains visible in the drawing, again referencing the idea that the drawings, like the spaces we live in, are forever in a state of construction. If they were to be completely developed, they would risk becoming illustrations—frozen in a specific time.

Of course, our urban landscape is constantly reminding us that our built environment is not static, no matter how solid it seems. Some changes to these spaces are immediate; trashcans move, gates are closed, cigarette bins get emptied, traffic cones get moved. Other changes are built up over time. The surface of an electrical box accumulates idiosyncratic marks from years of taped show flyers and graffiti tags (Figure 7). Clueless drivers bend metal, chip paint, and tear up the infrastructure meant to contain them (Figure 8). These changes, accumulated over time, inform how we understand the spaces we inhabit. They speak not only of individual behavior, but also to communal ideas of value, safety, and accessibility.

In the drawing of *Off the Grid*, the act of walking also manifests itself in the form of barriers and pathways. At its most basic, drawing is a process of defining spaces, delineating boundaries, and describing the possibility of movement between these spaces. In my drawings, pathways between barriers (objects, walls, etc.) play an important role in communicating to the viewer how to read the drawings. In *South Washington Home, Across from the Church of Christ*, for example, I created routes through the various spaces that follow, but also contradict, the logic of the architecture (Figure 9). Some rooms in the drawing contain obvious doorways, while others are divided by a single line. Some walls are defined using a flat wash of colored gouache.

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I wanted to highlight in my drawings because I feel like it pushes against the feeling of solidity of straight line architecture; thus the choice to use a natural palette of burnt sienna, light yellow and phthalo blues.

Other walls are ambiguous or missing completely. In this way, I am bringing attention to the boundary-creating function of drawing. Lines in a drawing not only reference the shape of objects and their relationship to each other, they also give us information about how we can, and cannot, move through the space that they create.

Of course, our spatial understanding of environments is built around access. We conceive of our surroundings in terms of accessibility; where can we go and where can we not go. Which brings us back to personal and public understandings of place, because ideas about access are interwoven into both our individual experiences and shared ideas. We understand that a stranger's house is off limits to us because we are both physically denied access to the space (through locked doors, closed windows, etc) and legally bound to honor the conceptual lines of private property. As we grow up, we learn how to negotiate the difference between physical and cultural impediments to space.

One way we learn about these boundaries, both real and imagined, is through drawing. Maps teach us about how the world is divided up on a micro and macro level, from property lines to the borders of nation states. Architectural renderings narrate the story of how a space is created through the use of walls, hedges and fences. I used the clean, isometric lines in *Off the Grid*, because like most informational drawing systems, they carry about them the air of expertise and authority that comes from established institutions. In this way, I am asking this visual language to act as the voice of authority in my work. As spatial arbitrator, it communicates to the viewer that the veracity of the marks they see on the paper are backed by centuries of tradition, learning and science. It sets up the terms for understanding the arrangement of space in the drawings; that while I might be the one establishing the boundaries in these worlds, there exists a tacit understanding of institutional approval of how they are constructed.

This is important because the details of the drawings subvert the ideas of public and

private space established by the architectural framework. They do this through visual access. After all, a large part of our experience of walking is visual. We also access spaces through vision—our eyes allow for us to understand spaces outside the reach of our bodies. In *South Washington Home, Across from the Church of Christ*, I open doors, take off the roof, and knock down walls for the purpose of allowing the viewers a look inside. After all, it is my house. I control who can enter; who has access and who does not.

*South Street Construction Site* sets up a different dynamic between visual and physical access. The site is physically off limits to pedestrians. After all it is private property, not to mention dangerous to non-workers. Yet, as I walk past it every morning and afternoon on my way to work, I have visual access into the space. I can watch as the workers pour footings, establish a foundation, and frame the house. Someday soon, the site will turn into lots and the newly built houses will have privacy hedges, sight-blocking trees in their front yard, and blinds on the window. The space will become visually private, working alongside the physical and legal boundaries already put in place.

By using drawing as the means of mapping out space in *Off the Grid*, I am tying the physical experience of moving through space, with all of its pathways and boundaries, to that of visual perception. I chose what spaces the viewer could look into and what spaces they could not. But once allowed in, what is the viewer actually looking at? What actually makes the pathways, barriers, and boundaries found in the work? This is the subject of my next section, *The Material World*.

## ***THE MATERIAL WORLD***

In the last chapter, I wrote about one way of reading the drawings in *Off the Grid*; as a description of a space made up of the pathways and boundaries to both movement and vision. Of

course, these barriers and pathways are made up of representations of actual surfaces and objects. A port-a-potty shoved between electrical boxes in an alley; a box fan carefully balanced on a dining room chair; a dumpster overflowing with broken office furniture; all of these are moments of everyday objects performing their function in an imperfect manner. To varying degrees, these small improvisations in how we use commonplace objects are a testament to how all of us live. This is because we all reside, not in the idealized world of plans and models, but rather in a messy, layered landscape full of half-fixes, patch jobs, and duct tape.<sup>18</sup> The spaces we live in are *lived-in*...and it shows.

Yet how we communicate spatial ideas often gloss over the complexity of how we actually use spaces. If I bring up the word *bedroom* in a conversation, for example, there are certain conventions that will be assumed about the space. There is sure to be a bed, probably a dresser, maybe a closet, a nightstand, and a lamp. The objects that make up a bedroom are not set in stone (and obviously it changes between cultures and over generations), yet there is still a shared idea of what a bedroom is and how it is used. At the same time, we use these everyday spaces and objects in non-generalized ways all the time. I use my bed for sleeping but I also use it as a surface on which I fold clean laundry. There exists a spot on the top of my bookcase, next to the television, where I tend to place my unopened mail. In my garage, there is an east facing wall that I stack boards against, because there is no window to obstruct and they just feel more organized there than someplace else.

I am making an obvious point—that we tend to use spaces and things in ways that are counter to their perceived function—but it is important in the context of my work, because it gets

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, geography, money, and social class all dictate just how non-ideal our surrounding spaces may be, but I would argue, that no place is immune to topographical, geological, historical, or institutional constraints.

at why we have trouble describing the complexity of spatial experiences. We tend to speak about everyday objects and settings, and our relationship to them, in terms that are both generalized and idealized. The places I am depicting in my drawing come from moments when idealized space runs up against the messy realities of our lived in world. These can include moments when ambitions run up against constraints; for example, when our attempts to perfectly organize and decorate our homes runs into the limitations of space, existing structures, money, and taste. Yet it can also include spatial solutions to everyday problems, from the simple to the ingenious, that dot our landscape. One reason I chose to map out alleyways in *A Survey of Fayetteville Alleyways in Five Sections* is because of the abundance of maintenance architecture that exists behind the buildings (Figure 10). Dumpsters, junction boxes, bollards, electric and gas meters, wiring (both in use and abandoned), air conditioning units, and retaining walls; these are all examples of the objects and structures that help keep our buildings connected to the city infrastructure. We deploy them in ways that privilege function over aesthetics, and these functions often change through time. Looking at the number of different dumpsters that show up in the first three sections of *A Survey of Fayetteville Alleyways*, for example, you see that some reside in a space that seem specifically made for them while others end up crossing over parking spaces and crowding staircases. Most of our environments, both public and domestic, are made up of additions, compromises, and quick fixes, yet it is idealized space that so often makes it into visual representations of urban space. Put another way, we often seem stuck in visualizing our spaces in futurist (even Utopian) terms—how seamless and precise our places will be once they reach their full potential. What these aspirational representations miss is that it is the messy layering of histories, cultural interaction, and personal idiosyncrasies that gives us insight into how humans produce and utilize space.

This is an idea that many other artists, novelists, and poets have explored. The writer,

Georges Perec, is one of the most influential to my own thinking about how we conceive everyday objects and environments. In *Species of Space*, Perec thinks through his relationship to the spaces that surround him starting from the page he writes on, to his bed, his bedroom, the apartment, the apartment building, the street; continuing in scale until finally ending with a chapter on the world. Perec connects his own personal connection to everyday spaces and objects to their inherent, yet often unnoticed, strangeness. Important to my own work, though, is Perec's insistence that human behavior is spatial, and it is in vernacular spaces that we will begin to better understand ourselves and others.<sup>19</sup>

*Off the Grid* is my attempt at mapping out this relationship between everyday behavior and the urban landscape. Like Perec, I am interested in how these relationships can be represented on different scales. For example, in *Bike Path Junction Box, Rear View*, I transcribe the layers of old tape, triangles of paper from old flyers, sharpie tags, band stickers, and graffiti-covering paint jobs that make up the surface of an electrical box (Figure 7). Like the thousands of pieces of infrastructure that dot our landscape, this box plays a very specific maintenance function. Yet its presence, along a Fayetteville bike path, allows it to play a quite different function; as a means of public communication and individual expression.

In the larger works these objects become vignettes that make up a larger world. They reference not only their own functions and meanings, but also their relationships to each other and to their surrounding spaces. In mapping out these spaces, I looked for relationships that called attention to human behavior in specific but relatable ways. In other words, I chose vignettes with narratives that are at once understandable, open to interpretation, and sometimes absurd. Idiosyncrasies may be unique to individuals, but they often speak to broader, shared

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<sup>19</sup> Perec, Georges, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, (London: Penguin, 1974), 1-96.

behaviors that come from how we understand and inhabit space. I believe that people recognize that our experiences in spaces can be simultaneously unique *and* prevalent, intimate *and* communal. For example, congregants at a place of worship are taking part in an experience that is thought to be both intensely personal and social. Yet this complexity in how we use space is not likely to show up in visual representations of our cities and domestic spaces.

In *Seeing Like a State*, political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott uses the phrase “regimes of legibility” to describe state actions that attempt to organize and standardize localized practices as a means of managing people and their environments. Scott argues that these regimes of legibility are useful for managing a system as complex as a city, but even at their most benign, they often paper over communal and regional knowledge that, while messy, play an equal role in keeping our cities running.<sup>20</sup> This knowledge shows up in interactions and language, but it is also spatial. Not every activity can be fit onto a grid. The drawings of *Off the Grid* are my attempts at bringing the idiosyncratic and intimate into the sphere of legibility. The process that I use—of multiple trips through these spaces, deep observation, and careful rendering forms by hand—is a laborious one for a reason; it speaks to the attention needed to begin understanding just how complex and strange our everyday spaces truly are.

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<sup>20</sup> Scott, James C.. *Seeing Like a State*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1-8.

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## Appendix: Figures



Figure 1: Unknown Artist, *Sights in and around Kyoto*, Mid Genna era (1615-24), Ink and color on gold- leafed paper, 153.5×357.5cm (each), Shimane Art Museum, Matsue-shi, Japan.  
From:<http://www.shimane-art-museum.jp/en/collection/>



Figure 2: Installation shot of *A Survey of Fayetteville Alleyways in Five Section*. Photo by Esther Nooner.

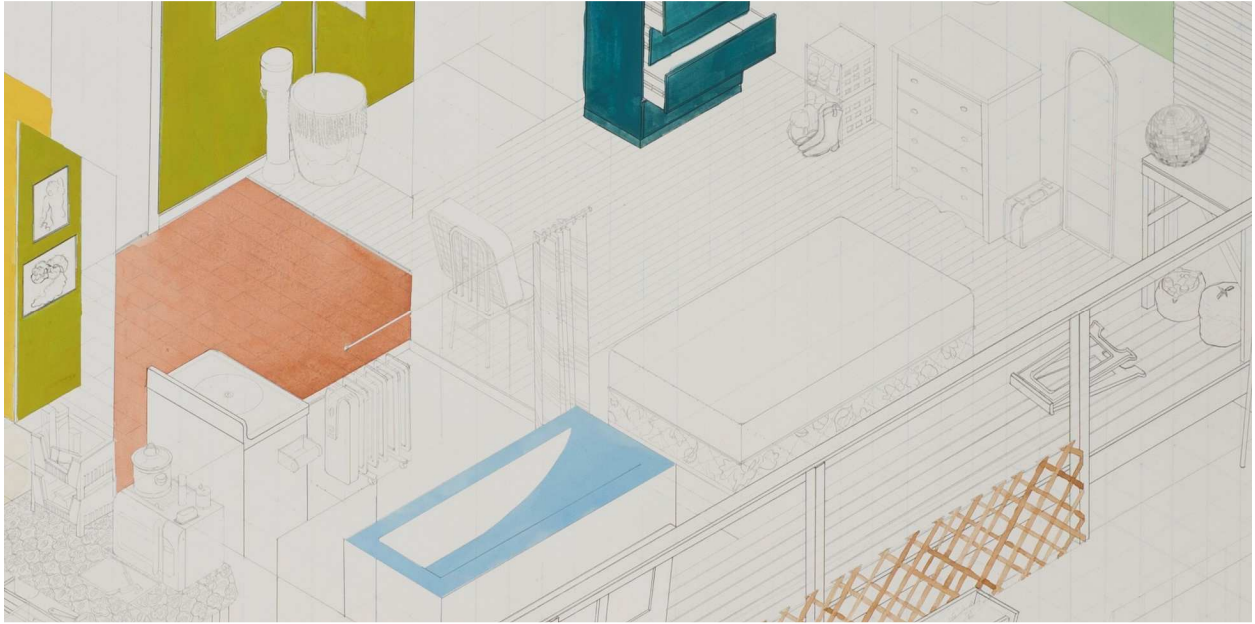


Figure 3: Owen Buffington, *(detail) South Washington Home, Across from the Church of Christ*, Graphite, watercolor, gouache, and acrylic on paper, 42 x 84 inches, 2017. From: <https://owen-buffington.squarespace.com/>.

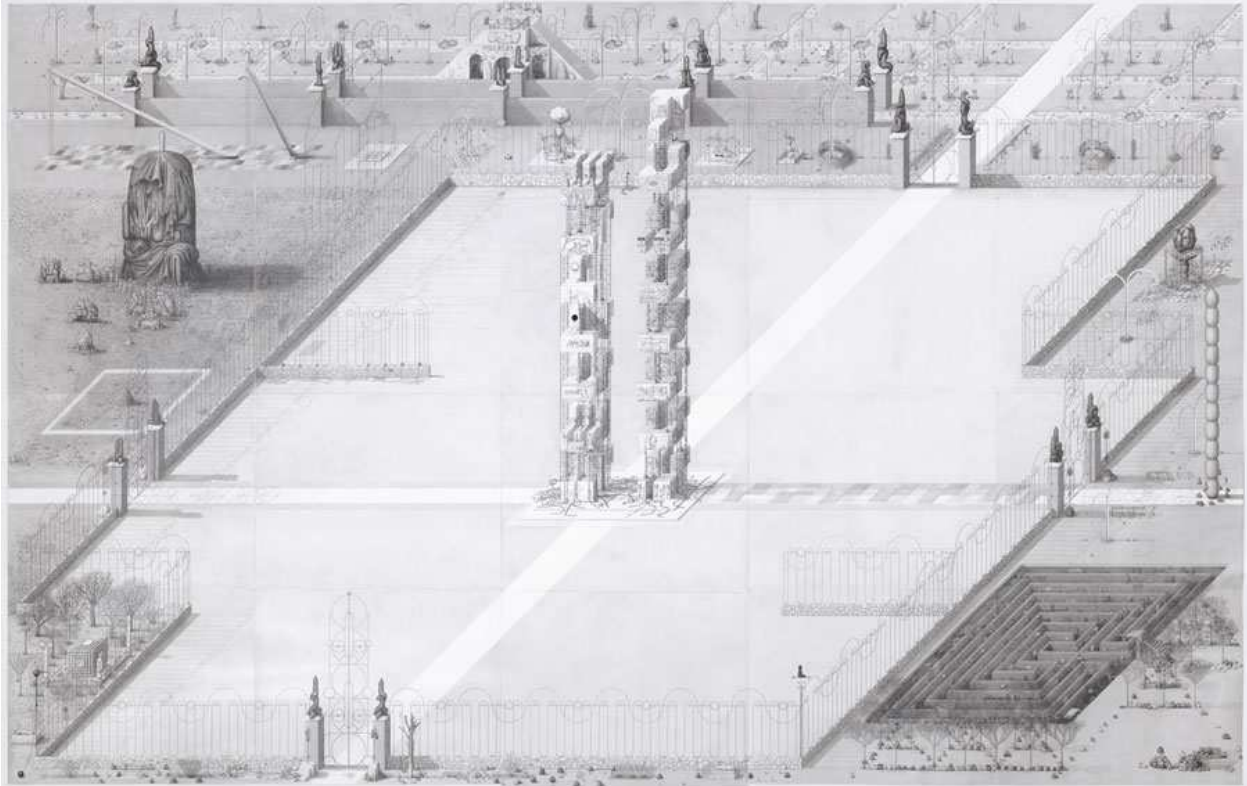


Figure 4: Paul Noble, *Welcome to Nobson*, Pencil on paper, 2008–10.  
From: <http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/paul-noble--november-10-2011/exhibition-images>.

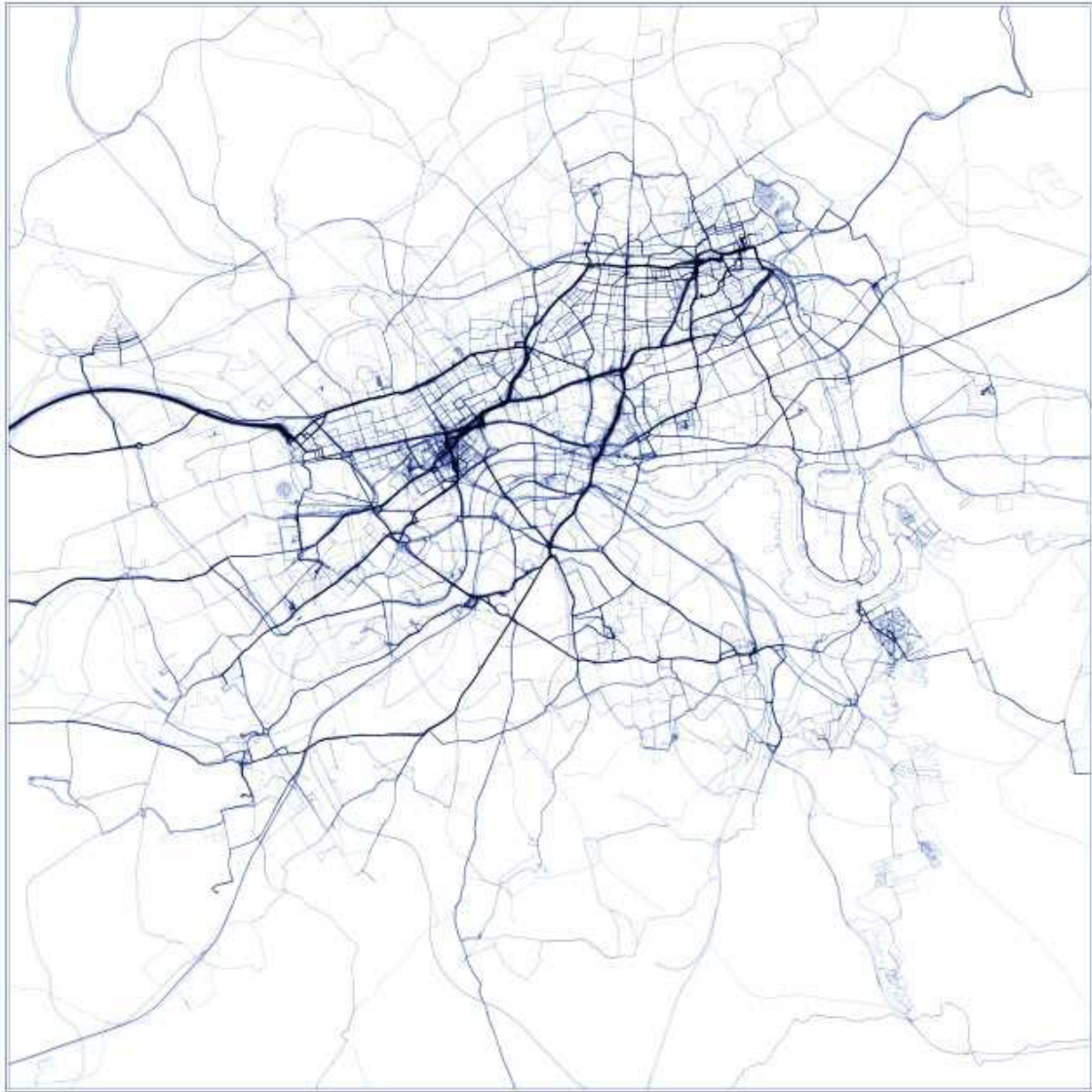


Figure 5: Jeremy Wood, *My Ghost*, 1:100,000 scale London GPS Map, Giclée print, 330x330 mm, 2000-2012. From: <http://www.gpsdrawing.com/maps.html>.

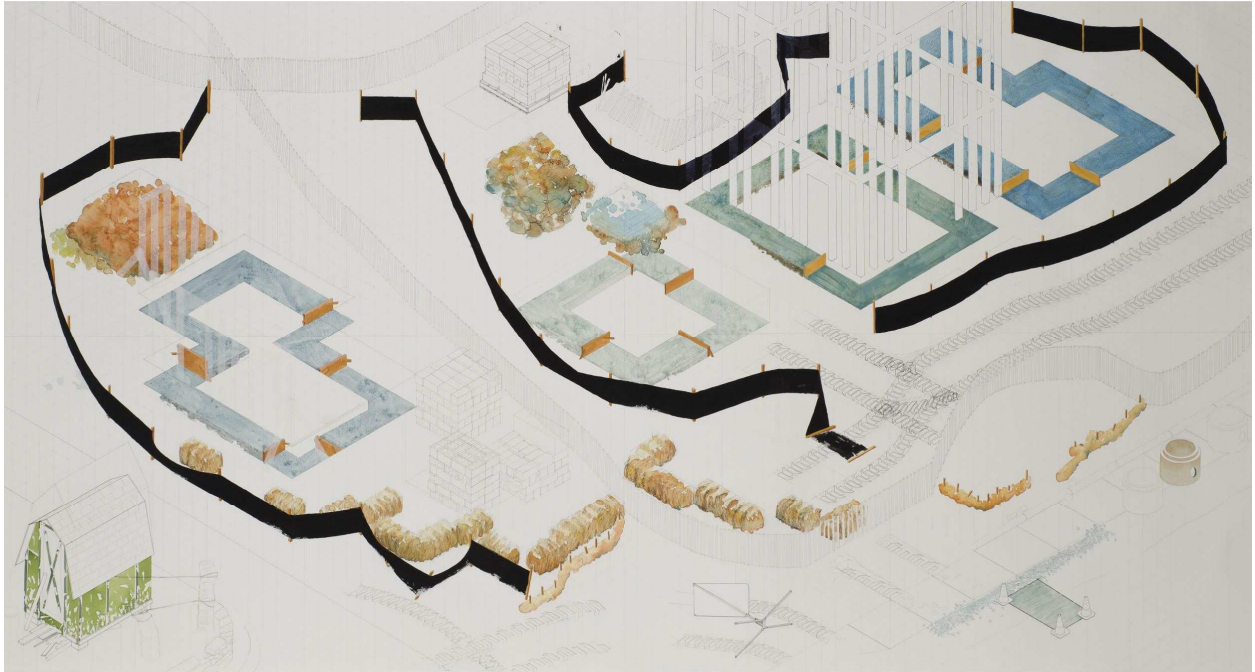


Figure 6: Owen Buffington, *South Street Construction Site*, Graphite, watercolor, gouache, acrylic, and Nichiban tape on paper, 42 x 78 inches, 2017. From: <https://owen-buffington.squarespace.com/>.



Figure 7: Owen Buffington, *Bike Path Junction Box, Rear View*, Graphite, watercolor, and gouache on paper, 36 x 43 inches, 2017. From: <https://owen-buffington.squarespace.com/>.

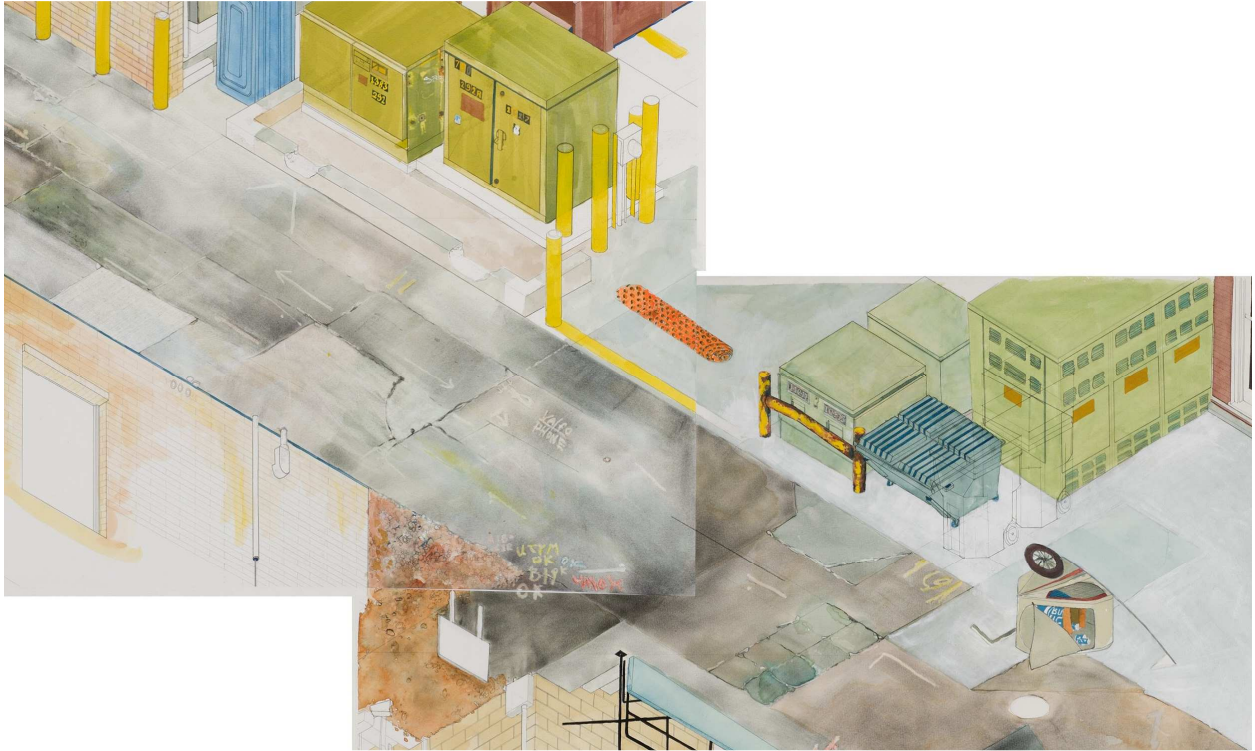


Figure 8: Owen Buffington, *(detail) A Survey of Fayetteville Alleyways in Five Sections (Section I)*, Graphite, watercolor, gouache, and acrylic on paper, 2017. From: <https://owen-buffington.squarespace.com/>.



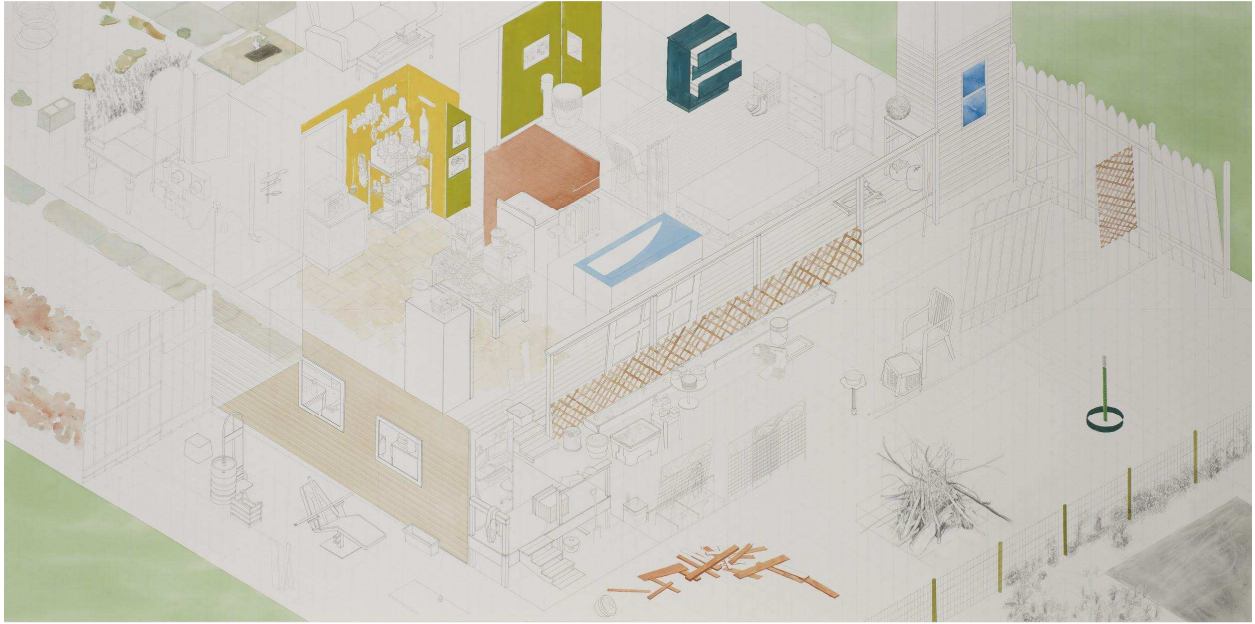


Figure 9: Owen Buffington, *South Washington Home, Across from the Church of Christ*, Graphite, watercolor, gouache, and acrylic on paper, 42 x 84 inches, 2017. From: <https://owen-buffington.squarespace.com/>.

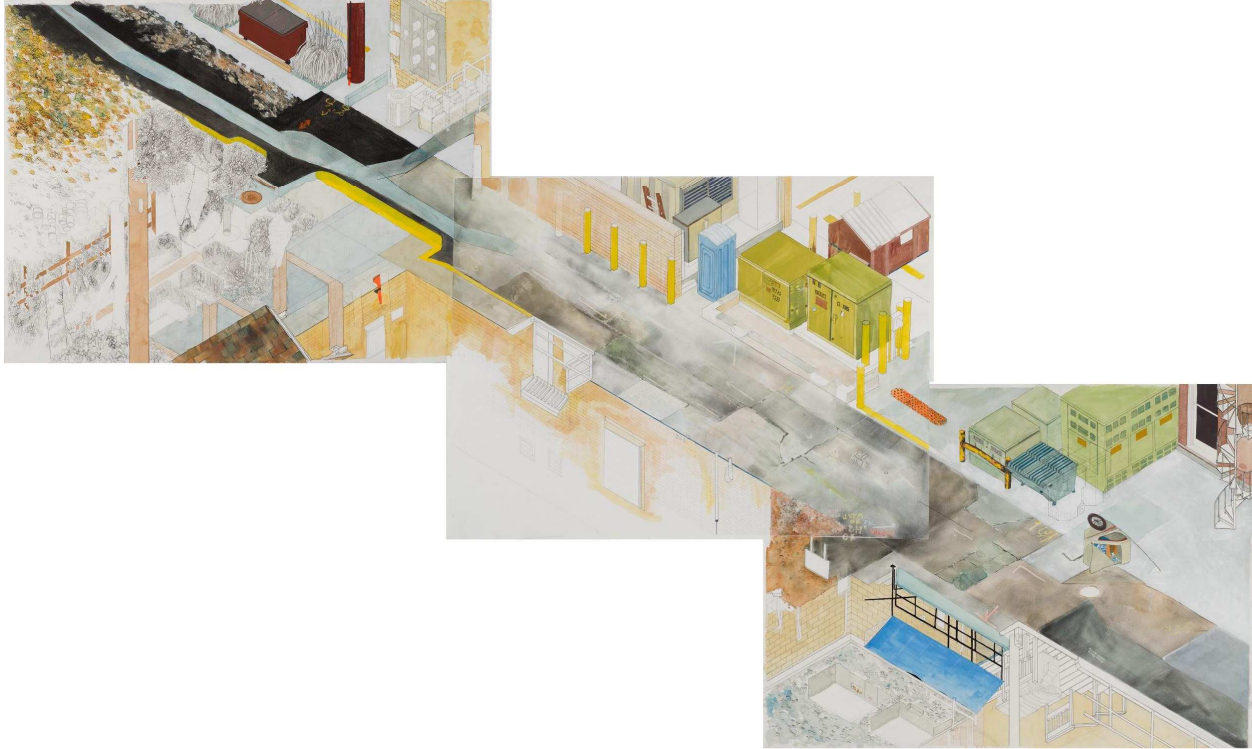


Figure 10: Owen Buffington, *A Survey of Fayetteville Alleyways in Five Sections (Section 1)*, Graphite, watercolor, gouache, and acrylic on paper, 2017. From: <https://owen-buffington.squarespace.com/>.



Figure 11: Owen Buffington, *A Survey of Fayetteville Alleyways in Five Sections (Section 2)*, Graphite, watercolor, gouache, and acrylic on paper, 2017. From: <https://owen-buffington.squarespace.com/>.



Figure 12: Owen Buffington, *A Survey of Fayetteville Alleyways in Five Sections (Section 3)*, Graphite, watercolor, gouache, and acrylic on paper, 2017. From: <https://owen-buffington.squarespace.com/>.



Figure 13: Owen Buffington, *A Survey of Fayetteville Alleyways in Five Sections (Section 4)*, Graphite, watercolor, gouache, and acrylic on paper, 2017. From: <https://owen-buffington.squarespace.com/>.



Figure 14: Owen Buffington, *A Survey of Fayetteville Alleyways in Five Sections (Section 5)*, Graphite, watercolor, gouache, and acrylic on paper, 2017. From: <https://owen-buffington.squarespace.com/>.