



## Skunk Motel

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The words “Skunk Motel” appeared on the façade of the building one morning. Some spray-can wielding kids hit the derelict structure in the middle of the night leaving behind their individual tags, “Skunk” and “Motel 6,” scrawled across doors, boarded up windows and brick, fusing everything into one Cubist blitz of surfaces and letterforms and combining the two *throw ups*, as this kind of graffiti is called, into a suitable name for the shabby edifice. It was this lettering that caught my eye and made me think about the building in a new way, speculating about what kind of life it had had, the changes it had gone through and what the name Skunk Motel meant as signage for this new imaginary enterprise.

Not that the building is an outstanding piece of architecture. Like most houses in the area, like most houses everywhere, it is a simple brick box with a smattering of architectural details that give it stylistic identity. The building’s abandoned state and run-down condition must have made it irresistible to the graffiti artists as a suitable blank canvas; there was no one to hear the hiss of the spray cans and no one to stop them. What they painted—from the wildly different styles I suspect there were two of them working side by side—created ironic signage while simultaneously giving voice to issues of homelessness, soaring housing prices, and the runaway gentrification of Toronto’s artsy west end. Like Rachel Whiteread’s famous cast concrete house in London, England, this iconoclastic yet artistic intervention made public what many had thought privately, creating a site for commentary, protest, and reflection.

I would never have paid much attention to Skunk Motel, which was literally a dump, if it hadn’t been for the graffiti lettering. Skunk Motel, like many of the middle-class houses in the area, consists of two conjoined buildings, each a mirror



image of the other. My house and its Siamese twin adhere to a similar plan and have not changed much since they were built. Skunk Motel on the other hand is a battle-scarred survivor, the victim of multiple tenants, indifferent landlords and now a neglectful owner probably waiting for a demolition permit. The eastern porch still has its original wooden columns although the pine floor has several holes where legs have gone through rotten boards inadvertently creating suitable homes for the motel's namesake animal. It has lost its second-storey bay window. The western porch is concrete and the original wooden columns have been replaced with wrought iron. The slate shingles, which would have been the standard roofing material when all the houses in this area were built, are now only visible on the sides of the third floor dormer. Doors and windows, house numbers and mailboxes have probably been replaced numerous times.

I have lived in my house for twenty-five years and in the west end for a little longer so I know the area well. I walk my dog around the block on which Skunk Motel is located and have become familiar with many of the architectural details of the houses, particularly the variety of stained glass windows. There are designs depicting tulips, hanging swag, fleur-de-lis or organic abstractions bordering on Art Nouveau, all of them with a vertical axis of symmetry. At night, the pale grey, green and yellow stained glass seems to hold back aquariums of light with interior details obscured by the texture of the glass. I have also paused on numerous occasions out of necessity while my dog marked yet another tree or fencepost, and briefly studied the eclectic mix of architectural styles that give the neighbourhood its unique character. This character is a mix of Neoclassical, Tudor and Arts and Crafts. There are white Doric columns and little temple-like side entrances, half-



timbered gables peeking out from behind spruce trees, and the ubiquitous bay window on the second story with upper sashes often divided—as is the case with the remaining bay window of Skunk Motel—into three or four six-sided vertical panes. All these architectural features that originated in Europe and England have migrated across the Atlantic and ended up here in the designs of early twentieth century houses. Skunk Motel was based on an architectural model that had crystallized in a single architect's imagination, a fusion of elements from the history of architecture.

Aside from the architectural influences that have determined its structure, Skunk Motel has a history that is linked to the site on which it was built. This undulating topography is unique in the flat, rectilinear plan of the city. Thousands of years ago, this area was on the bottom of a glacial lake, with waves washing up on the shore of a beach cliff now several miles from the current shoreline. A creek drained this gently sloping plain once the water subsided, and left behind the hills and valleys that characterize this part of the city. My house, for example, is built on a slight hill that is a remnant of the former bank of this old stream, called Garrison Creek because it once emptied into the lake beside the old British Garrison.

Before Skunk Motel was built then, this area was still farmland with tobacco and other crops grown by tenant farmers. The Denison family, with old British military connections, owned most of the land, which had been acquired as hundred-acre park lots running north from a surveyed baseline called Lot Street. John Taylor Denison, one of three sons, managed his portion of the estate from Heydon Villa, which once stood, as can be seen in old photographs, on the north bank of an east/west branch of Garrison Creek, a stone's throw from Skunk Motel. With its Doric columns and surrounding veranda, Heydon Villa was likely the model for the scaled-down versions of its grandeur that were built around it once the farmland was subdivided for development. Heydon Villa survives in the name of an

aging Tudor-style apartment complex built on the site of the old homestead and in the name of the street that meanders past it following the course of the former stream.

I saw an archaeological slice of the original topography of the area when the Ukrainian Church, directly across the street from Skunk Motel was demolished a few years ago to make way for a townhouse development. When they excavated for the foundations, they exposed a strata of earth on a part of the site that had clearly never been built on. Beneath the upper layer of sod and dark humus the ochre-coloured virgin soil sloped down toward the old channel of Garrison Creek. From this small cross-section I got a brief glimpse of the wooded valley that had once existed.

Skunk Motel is one of hundreds of houses all built around the turn of the century on what was at that time, the suburban edge of the city. Garrison Creek had by that date already been buried within a four foot six inch diameter brick-lined sewer that can still be heard gurgling beneath the cast iron utility covers in my street. Skunk Motel was built on what would have been the eastern bank of one of its tributaries. The dip in the land and in College Street is still visible today. In keeping with the Arts and Crafts aesthetic of the time and the economics of pre-automobile transport, construction materials for these houses were drawn from the region: brick from the red earth of Terra Cotta, limestone for foundations from the Niagara Escarpment, and pine and spruce from Northern Ontario. The farmland consumed by these new housing tracts had long ago claimed any locally available lumber. Skunk Motel was probably sold to two different families who began their lives on either side of the common dividing wall that separated their mirror-image houses.

Even as the valley of Garrison Creek was filled in, probably with earth excavated prior to building local house foundations, it continued to influence the development of the west end. These filled areas were unstable and less desirable as building lots so they were built on last, with the result that the neighbourhood forms a kind of accidental genealogy of building types from the early 1900s up to the 1950s. Several large apartment buildings, with the common architectural mix of Tudor, Arts and Crafts and Neo-Classical styles, were constructed in some of these low-lying areas. The cracked walls and out of whack windows on a rambling two-storey yellow brick building just up the street from my house bears witness to the unstable ground on which part of it was built. The earlier northern section has doorways flanked by Doric columns, each pair supporting a semi-circular tympanum. The southern section, built a few years later, has Arts and Crafts style flat porch roofs supported by brackets below and diagonal chains above. This building, now almost vacant, is awaiting City Hall approval for demolition.

I went by Skunk Motel almost every day as I took the streetcar to the university where I was teaching and every night on my usual circuit with my dog. So I had ample opportunity to study the lettering and think about what it meant as signage

and how it gave expression to the imaginary life of the building. I could imagine the many different families each of whom had decorated the rooms with different colours, different wallpapers, and unique groupings of furniture and had lived within the building with their own mental image of its space. I could imagine the American artist, Gordon Matta-Clark, whose work I had included in one of my university courses, cutting huge circular holes into the walls of Skunk Motel, exposing all this layered history—interior rooms, wallpaper patterns, and severed floor joists—to the light of day and the views of passersby.

The meager architectural details of Skunk Motel, even its missing details, made me aware of its basic architectural form, a form that is duplicated, with slight variations, throughout the neighbourhood. Just as one half of Skunk Motel is a mirror image of the other, the building itself is mirrored in most of the houses in the west end. I began to realize that Skunk Motel was more than its physical structure, that what was visible on the street was just a false front, like the façade of a funhouse. Within the space that spread like a Leviathan behind the façade lurked the experiences and memories of everyone who had lived in Skunk Motel or its cloned neighbourhood equivalents. With their impromptu signage, the graffiti artists had shone a spotlight through time, illuminating a history that had gone unnoticed because it was impossible for one person to see and too ephemeral to document.

Skunk Motel was the name of this midway ride through time. The graphic style of each word evoked its own historic associations and influences from Popular Culture. The letters of the word Skunk, difficult to discern at first, are all based on the same geometric pattern of four rectilinear forms with rounded corners assembled in a grid, with the upper left and lower right portions enlarged. The blue lines that distinguish the “K” from the “U” are so subtle that most people I showed my photographs to couldn’t see the difference. With most graffiti, legibility is secondary to speed of execution and formal inventiveness. Because the lettering appeared on the building just before Christmas, I saw each letter as a snow-covered continent veined by blue rivers flowing to an arctic sea. Whether the graffiti artist was aware of it or not, his modular Skunk letters are reminiscent of the computer punch card letters of the 1960s in which letterforms had to conform to the thick and thin rectangular slots that could be read by computers.

Looking so closely at the letters making up Skunk made me curious about the animal itself. I did some cursory research and discovered that skunks are native to North and South America but not to Europe. The word “skunk” was derived from the aboriginal Abenaki word variously spelled *segounkw* or *segunki*. *Skunk* had its origin in Massachusetts where, one presumes, the early colonists, never having seen an animal like a skunk before, asked the native people what it was called and, putting together the best English approximation of what they heard, came up with the word skunk. Skunk is consequently a fusion of the alphabet of the Old World with the phonetics of the New World.

The other half of Skunk Motel is of recent origin, being a fusion of the words “motor” and “hotel.” Like the architectural details of the building, both words have European origins with New World applications. The word “Motel” as it appears on the ground floor brick façade is a white primeval word splashing around in its own generative soup. In keeping with the unsavory character of a place named after a very stinky animal, the coloured dots around the word suggest a polluted environment. The two detached drips at each end of the word and the third about to separate from the T suggest that the word itself is struggling, perhaps even sweating or crying, to get out of this situation. And yet, ironically, two white stars sparkle nearby as if evoking the sanitized image of the real Motel Six franchise after which Skunk Motel is named, or the night sky above dead-tired motorists, searching for a lit up Vacancy sign.

I looked at the word Motel many times before I saw the eye in the lowercase “e.” It is looking towards the door where the number six is painted within a white drip. Graphic devices like x’s and eyes are common in the interior spaces of graffiti letters. The “e” made me think of the famous E inscribed above the entrance of the temple at Delphi and interpreted by Plutarch in 200 B.C. as meaning “know thyself.” The conscious “e” in Motel seems to be eyeing the locked door, as if waiting for Skunk Motel to open, one big tear shed in its plea for accommodation.

Jorge Zontal of the artist’s group General Idea, once lived down the street from Skunk Motel in a semi-detached house much like my own. He lived there for a few years during the 1980s. I have a photograph of him covered with grass clippings lying in a hammock in the backyard. It might have been his birthday. Then he moved to New York and returned years later to stay with us for a month or two in the apartment on our third floor before the penthouse he was going to move into was ready. When I picked him up at the airport I noticed that his pants were sliding down off his hips. He was that much thinner. As I wheeled his luggage to the car in the parking garage a grey solid-bodied camera case slid off the dolly and fell to the ground. He assured me the camera inside would be fine.

After he moved to the penthouse I visited him there frequently, usually with some food I’d made myself—saffron risotto was his favourite. His eyesight was failing so I began to read to him and to look at gouache drawings he had made in New York. He wanted me to describe each one so he would know what I was looking at. He would laugh fiendishly as I tried to describe the curious amalgamations of assholes and heads, penises and torsos, some with ambiguous bits of anatomy bristling with stubble *à la* Philip Guston. Even as he declined physically, Jorge retained his provocative and outrageous side. It was in this apartment that he completed his last works of art, drawings of giant cockroaches that he claimed were crawling all over his room. Of course, there was no such infestation—the moving black spots were the holes in his degenerating retinas. Jorge left me his Hasselblad camera, the camera that had been inside the grey case at the airport and the same one he had used many years prior to photograph the Dalai Lama

before the latter fled his native Tibet. I used it to photograph the lettering on the front of Skunk Motel.

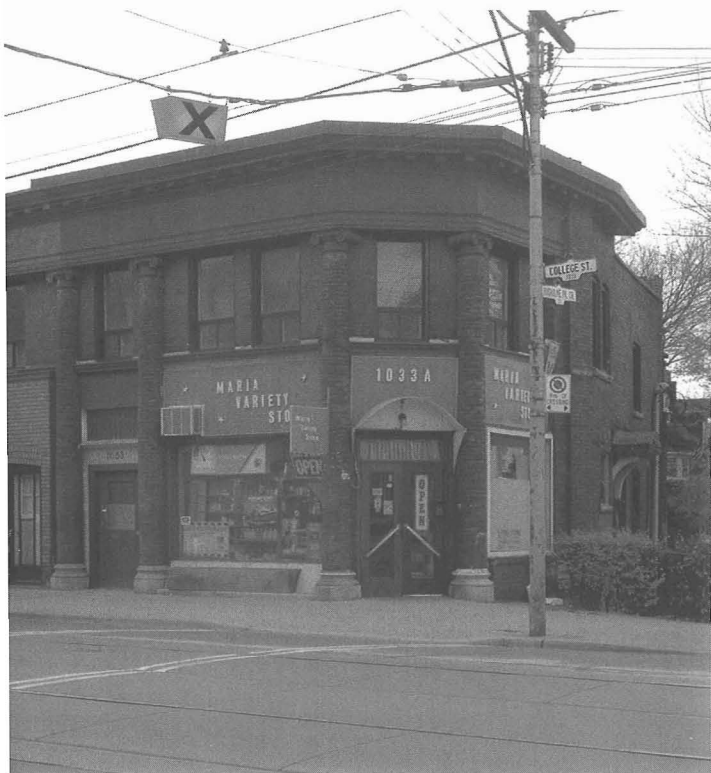
Whenever I've used his camera I've always felt that he was there with me going through the checklist of steps, making sure I didn't forget anything. Jorge had decorated the black leather case of his light meter that came with the camera with green and white dots and irregularly shaped pieces of pink tape outlined with blue. So whenever I took a light reading he was always there checking the reading with me. I used his camera to photograph two variety stores at the intersection at the end of my street, one with Doric columns and the other with Ionic. Except for

the different orders of their columns they are mirror images of each other. I always admired the way the columns are constructed of curved bricks like the ones I once saw at Ostia Antica outside Rome. Jorge and I shared a passion for things Italian.

I never knew what other businesses had operated in the buildings before I moved into the neighbourhood until one day when a letter that had been slipped through my mailbox got caught in a crack between the threshold and the oak flooring. As I pulled it out I noticed another letter deeper inside that I couldn't get out. I pulled some lath and plaster off the ceiling in the basement and got into the space from below. I found about fourteen letters in all, the oldest going back to 1931, each letter addressed to the various occupants of the house who had lived

in it before we did. One of the letters contained a card encouraging people to come and visit a new millinery shop that had just opened. The address was the store with Ionic columns at the end of my street.

Skunk Motel has been sitting empty for a couple of years. Notices were posted at one point informing neighbours of impending alterations to the building to convert it into a restaurant. We've watched the wave of gentrification move west along College Street as grocery stores closed and reopened as restaurants, the old



Polish War Veterans Hall was turned into a Jazz Club, and a Starbucks opened in a former Bank of Commerce building. Further south, The Cee Dee Candy Factory, which used to make the multi-coloured, cylindrical “Rocket” candy I remembered collecting on Halloween during my childhood, was reinvented as the Candy Factory Lofts. The sprawling Robert Bury Hardwoods on Sudbury Avenue with huge letters spelling out the company name along the north side of the ramshackle building was replaced with generic pseudo-Victorian townhouses, built, as far as I could tell, with no lumber at all. The houses seemed to be made out of brick, metal studs and rigid pink insulation. They are so plain it’s hard to say what architectural style they are supposed to be.

One morning the graffiti lettering on Skunk Motel was gone again, painted out by the owner of the building or perhaps by anti-graffiti crews from City Hall with a muddy pink mix of leftover paint. Without its signage the building lost its identity. The mailbox that had been dangling in the K of SKUNK was also gone. I searched around the side and back of the building with my dog to see if I could find it but it had vanished. I suppose I wanted some souvenir of Skunk Motel, something that would confirm that it had once existed, that letters had actually been delivered to a real address. My dog looked at me quizzically wondering when we were going to continue on our usual route.

Skunk Motel had given a focus to ideas that had been drifting through my mind for many years, ideas about the slow, almost undetectable rate of change. I realize now that those changes were all stored in my memory and in the memory of everyone who had ever lived in the area. Individually, none of us had the whole picture. All the photographs we had taken would never be assembled into one album to reconstruct the slowly changing reality we had lived through. It took an imaginary motel to bring us together and to suggest that we were all occupants of one place over a long span of time.

