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# School of Art

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4Years/40Walls is photographer John Bendel's interactive website gallery of photos he's taken of the city's abandoned Spring Garden School No. 1, located on Melon Street in West Poplar. The photographs were taken in July 2011, August 2013, and December 2015 and show the progression of graffiti and vandalism over a window of time. We talked to Bendel to find out more about his adventures inside the school and the photographs that he came away with.

**What first brought you to Spring Garden school?**  
A Philadelphia explorer  told me about it.

**What were your thoughts the first time you photographed the school?**

In 2009 it was just another abandoned building to explore and shoot. There was not much graffiti in the place and I was not as drawn by paint as I would become—at Spring Garden and elsewhere.

**What rooms specifically did you focus on photographing?**

Rooms with paint on the walls and light to shoot by. That eliminated the basement, but not much else. The classrooms were more engaging than other rooms, probably because of the blackboards that seemed to invite taggers and artists. They framed much of the work even when it flowed out of the rectangle. The classrooms inspired snarky comments. One tagger wrote, “I didn’t go to high school, I went to school high.” On the blackboard of one trashed room, another wrote, “This is why we can’t have nice things.” Yet another wrote, “Fresh out of jails and institutions.” One guy obviously in a sharing mood wrote, “I got bumps on my dick!”

**What were the challenges to photographing these abandoned rooms?**

At Spring Garden, it was finding solid footing for the tripod. That’s not easy in some rooms littered with strewn textbooks, fallen ceiling tiles, and God knows what some of the other squishy stuff was. Light is always a challenge in old buildings, but each classroom at Spring Garden has a wall of windows. That made it a good place to work.

**What changes did you notice over the years you photographed?**

Spring Garden School was what we alternative tourists call a walk-in. No climbing, no crawling, no squeezing. You just opened the unlocked door and walked in. On my first visit early on a Sunday morning in 2009, it was the back door on the east end of the school.

Graffiti artists and taggers did a lot of work in the place, but scrappers had been there. Recyclers had removed or were un-installing windows and pipes. They were particularly tough on the bathrooms, they essentially pulverized in the process. When the school's most profitable materials were gone, scrappers pulled up flooring and even removed electrical fixtures. The city eventually took notice and padlocked the back door.

The highly visible front door on North 12th Street was already padlocked. But the same treatment didn't work on the back door. That's because you could barely see it from the street; a one-story auxiliary building blocked the view. Scrappers could use power tools and probably even explosives back there and not be noticed. A padlock was no challenge at all.

Soon, the city's first padlock had to be replaced by chains and a heavier padlock. They in turn were replaced by even heavier chains and massive padlocks. Then the city blocked the door with metal barricade bars. Finally, in 2011 or thereabouts, the city got serious. They welded heavy steel beams across the door, closing it for good. The city had won the Battle of the Back Door. The Battle of the Windows was about to begin.

Through the early 2010s, it was a game of cat and mouse—or plywood vs. crowbar—along the south side of the school. From Parrish Street you could clearly see which window was serving as the main entrance on any given day. Besides gaping open, the grand entry window would have a pallet leaning on the wall beneath it. An industrial pallet, of course, is an urban swashbuckler's impromptu ladder. For a while, a truck tire served the same purpose. Then the city brought out the welders and installed heavy metal screening. The basement entrance that has been alternately open and locked at various stages was recently welded shut in an elaborate fashion that seemed to be making a statement to would be visitors—enough, keep out. That's where things stand now.

**Did you ever run into other artists or other people in the school?**

Twice. On a Sunday in September 2014 two North Jersey

guys with cameras appeared at the roof. We chatted and posed for a group shot. A year, two Philadelphia explorers came in the now-welded-shut basement door just as I was approaching it to leave. I was invisible to them in the darkness from where I intoned, "Good morning, gentlemen." When they recovered, we went upstairs for a group shot. Other than that, I've always been alone in Spring Garden—as far as I know. That contrasted with the old Edison High on Lehigh and North 7th where you were never alone. That place is gone now.

**Were you concerned with the building's structural integrity or the trash that you would encounter?**

Trash, yes. Structure, no. Spring Garden School seems to be structurally sound, especially compared to other empty buildings with rotting floors, deteriorating staircases, and collapsing roofs.

**What type of graffiti is in your photos? Did you learn more about it over time?**

First, please understand this is not about shooting other people's work. Yes, their work is part of mine, like one song sample is part of another. I'm interested in a larger whole—the doors, the windows, the fixtures, and all the other paint. It's always more interesting if a piece of graffiti has been painted or tagged over, when intention intersects with heedlessness and even malice.

Can't say I learned much about graffiti. Once I got to spend a couple of hours with an artist, but that was more of a tour than a lesson. You do come to recognize certain tags that appear around the city and the region. I would love to know who these guys are and spend some time with them. But if you're not part of their community they're hard to find. Of course you can't help noticing that some painters are better than others, sometimes far better.

**What would you like to see happen with this building?**

It was well designed and built to be a neighborhood school. It would be great to see it serve as one again. But I'm sure there are many practical reasons why that can't happen. The city is closing schools at this point, isn't it?

Do you think these photos are for something good or bad? Do you feel sadness being in this space?



Both and both. The building itself and its intended function are good, so are those blasts of creativity on the flaking walls. They are vandalism by definition, but much more art than crime. The violent destruction, the nihilistic trashing are something else.

Any lingering aura of happiness arises from the energetic, colorful paint. The hallways and classrooms evoke sadness for the kids who grew up here, at least some of them with dreams, and the crushing realities they ultimately lived. This was not a school for rich kids.

For more information, visit [4years4owalls.com](http://4years4owalls.com)

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