

Introduction

Bellingham is a growing and evolving city, steeped in a rich culture of the arts. Almost every inch of public space is seen as a canvas to someone. Yet, there is clear evidence of an ongoing battle for this public space. A race between taggers, artists, businesses, disgruntled individuals, and city employees. Many walls, a patchwork of vibrant profanities and beige or brick red wash.

What we have captured is a snapshot of the composition of such art in the City Center area. A fleeting moment in a shifting collage of voices.

Research Question & Background

To effectively catalog this battle for the public eye, we chose to focus on three variables: Style, Location, and Legality.

-Location data provides obvious value when it comes to mapping and visualizing the distribution of the various samples.

-Style helps to inform us as to potential motive or intent behind the art.

We based our style typology on Halsey and Young (2002) for graffiti typology and Molnár, V. (2017) for their definition of street art.

-Legality, or whether the art is sanctioned further helps to inform the intent and motives behind the art. Two identical pieces of art can have very different meanings if the art is meant to be where it is.

With these factors in mind, we asked: How are varying styles of graffiti and street art distributed through the Bellingham City Center area?

Hypothetically, sanctioned art will be distributed more prevalently in highly public places, or on the walls of businesses. Whereas unsanctioned art will be distributed in more obscure areas, due to the risk of legal consequence.

Methods

Materials & Location

To collect the samples, we used an app called “AngleCam Lite” to take pictures of the art and to collect geolocation data at the same time to decrease the amount of time required to survey larger areas. The City of Bellingham’s maps of Public Art Collections and the Salmon Art trail were also used. The area that was surveyed for this project was the city center area of Bellingham.

Procedure

In our survey, we went along the streets and alleys taking pictures of public art we saw. Afterwards, the data that was collected was put into a custom Google Map, with color coding for the different types on two toggleable layers for the two separate typologies. For the art styles color coding, light blue was for ‘tag’ graffiti, dark green for ‘throw up’ graffiti, orange for political, yellow for ‘slogan’ graffiti, purple for murals, red for street art, dark brown for sculptures, dark blue for ‘piece’, and magenta for ‘other’.

Discussion

Our findings were largely supportive of our hypothesis. Our survey of the downtown area showed that walls, public seating, and other similar surfaces that were not facing main roads were much more highly decorated. Whereas large, public facing walls were much more likely to be filled with advertisements and sponsored art. Some areas were entirely, or mostly devoid of any graffiti art.

Most of these findings stand up to common sense reasoning. Businesses want to attract attention and protect their storefronts from vandalism. Public facing murals seem a fair means of accomplishing both, as the instance of tags or graffiti on these surfaces was considerably lower. On the other hand, alleys are filled wall to wall with various art styles almost frantically overlapping one another. Halsey and Young (2002) also mentioned a preference that graffiti artists have for the large blank canvases that walls can provide (171). The obscurement offers artists and taggers more working time without risk of undesired consequence. Interestingly, the City of Bellingham has created a dedicated free art space for public murals along the waterfront near Waypoint Park. Likely this is a means of trying to lure artists away from storefronts and towards the developing waterfront area. Finally, there were vast artistic “dead zones” due to the area being dominated by either large gated apartments or active construction sites. Both of which deter the vast majority of would-be artists from certain areas. This strategy is similar to the graffiti management strategy that Halsey and Young (2002) brought up, where designated graffiti areas are created in conjunction with some graffiti removal in other areas (177-178).

Unfortunately, our study had some pitfalls. In many instances it was difficult or impossible to determine the legality of a particular piece due to ambiguous positioning and styling. Additionally, several popular sites were so heavily layered with generations of art such that determining one piece from another would be difficult. On a similar vein, there were so many individual tags, murals, and graffiti of various kinds that doing a proper count was impractical given our timeframe and the ever-shifting nature of the medium.

While our findings do offer a unique view of the public art styles, distribution, and legality in the Bellingham City Center area, it is important to note that it is simply a brief moment in a rapidly shifting landscape. To gather a more comprehensive perspective on Bellingham’s shifting relationship with public art, we would need to gather much more similar data over time. Trends over months and years (correlated to ongoing developments in the area) would offer a much deeper view of the ebb and flow of art on the streets. Future research might also look into conducting a study similar to Megler et al. (2014), with a primary source for data rather than secondary (such as San Francisco’s Department of Public Works’ reporting system which Megler et al. used), to test if their findings regarding the broken windows hypothesis are valid.

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References/ Work Cited

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Portion of the Custom Google Map with QR Code

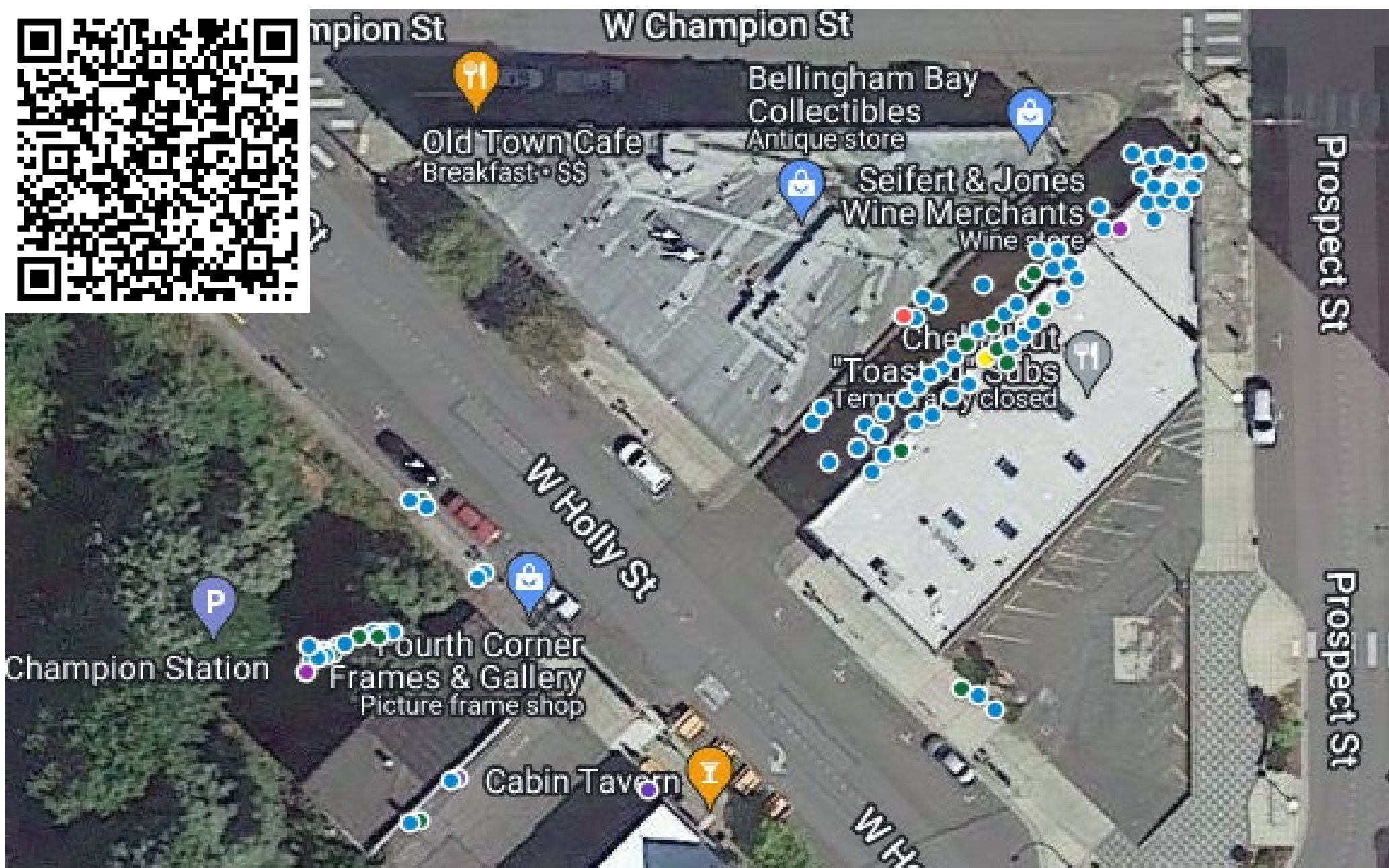


Figure.1. A small portion of the survey area, near where Rocket Donuts used to be. The typology layer being show is the art styles layer. Feel free to scan the QR code with your phone!



Figure.1. Examples of art types, with the top left being throw up, top right - piece, bottom left - slogan, and bottom right - tag.