

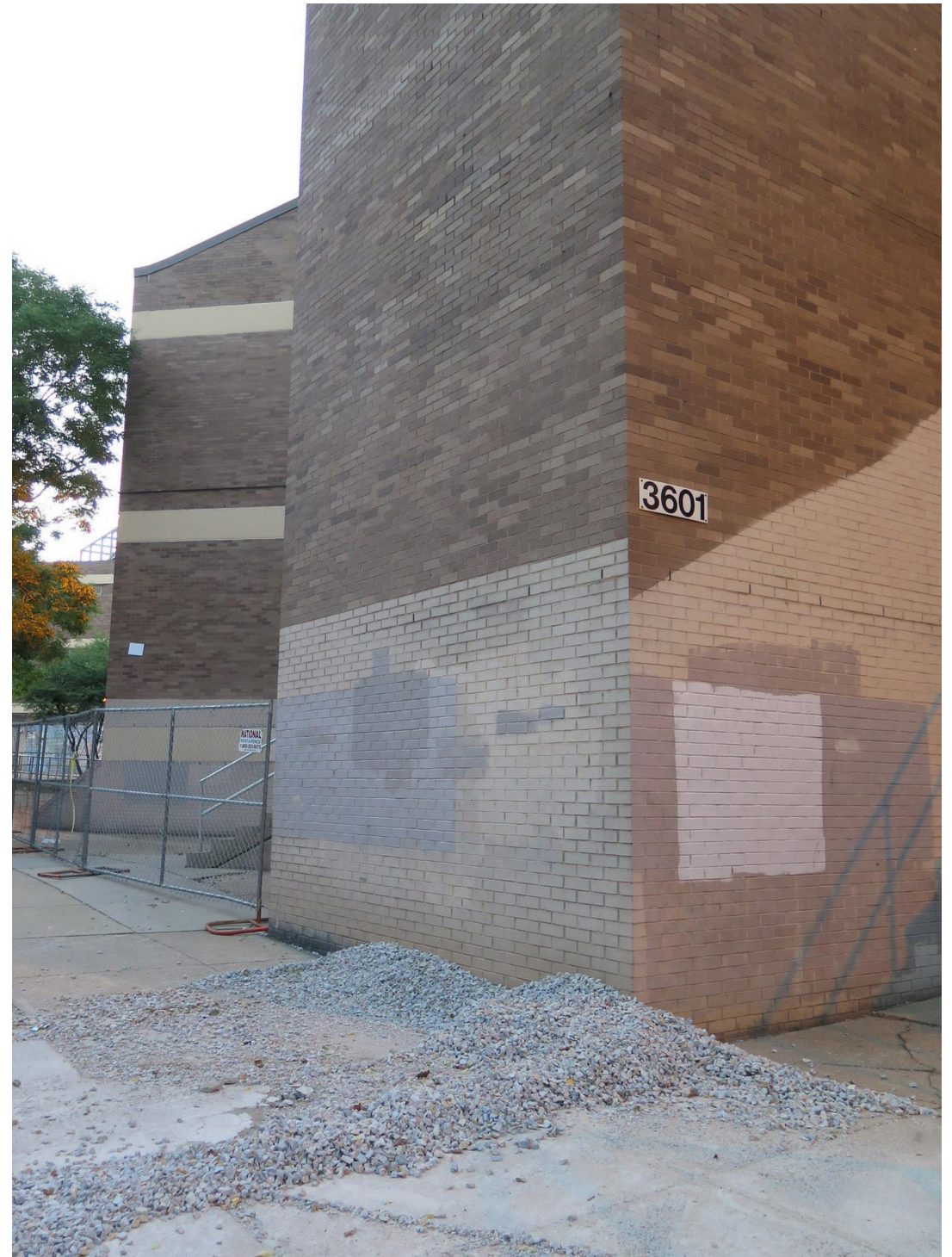
## READING RUBBLE

Paul M. Farber

*American Rubble: Micromonuments* addresses the urban physical and social transformations by focusing on unintended byproducts, debris, and infrastructural remnants. Anchored by the work of Mellon Creative Resident artist Stephanie Syjuco and Haverford College students, the project engages issues from the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to contemporary urban redevelopment and gentrification projects in Philadelphia's post-industrial neighborhoods. The goal: to imagine an archive of urban historical memory that repurposes rubble in order to tell the story of our current moment of economic change.

Following the early twenty-first century's Great Recession, Philadelphia is currently experiencing a swift pace of reinvestment, especially focused in neighborhoods that had been largely bypassed for economic stimulus over several decades. The city's recent spike in redevelopment coincides with an increased presence of both intended and unintended heaps of rubble worthy of serious consideration. This includes debris from a rash of prominent building collapses, including the former Salvation Army store at 22nd and Market Streets, and far less scrutinized but comparably crumpled sites around the metropolitan area. Rubble is often imagined as the sort of byproduct of urban warfare, not social change or reinvestment, but its ubiquity across city spaces marks the pivot between built and unbuilt environments. Piles of rubble dot a city in transition.

To explore these shifts, Syjuco—along with faculty and staff from multiple disciplines (including Anthropology, Chemistry, Environmental Studies, Fine Arts, Growth and Structure of Cities, History, Library Sciences, and Writing), students, and Philadelphia-area artists—are asking one another questions: How do past cycles of social division and urban renewal inform the present? How do we balance narratives of prosperity and opportunity with the actual displacement of longtime residents and civic institutions? Who is invited to participate in the remaking of our cities? Long interested in issues of labor and the effects of capitalism on society, Syjuco, a professor of Sculpture at UC-Berkeley and a 2014 Guggenheim Fellow, proposes an archive of



Corner of 36th and Filbert Streets, Philadelphia, outside the former UCHS.



“micromonuments” for this period. Similar to how pieces of the Berlin Wall became popularized as mementos of the fall of Communism and economic liberalization in Eastern Europe, *American Rubble* creates spectacles and collected souvenirs to build on this logic of commemoration. Syjuco monumentalizes cycles of industrial collapse and rebirth to invite speculation on the multiple forces of economic change affecting urban life.



*Last Harvest at UCHS*

of American “progress.” This includes a deep history of industrial innovation and decline, legacies of metropolitan connection and segregation, and more recently, the traumatic closing of University City High School and the designation of the area as a “Promise Zone” by the Obama administration. Like seashells gathered from a storied coastline, Syjuco’s Lancaster Avenue rubble pieces—collected from public sidewalks, curbs, and the edges of vacant lots—are residual artifacts of history.

During a semester-long investigation, students from three Haverford classes worked to create research materials and critical contexts for this rubble collection. These students pursued historical studies through forays into collaborative public art and social practice-based urban inquiry. By tending to

Through her Mellon Creative Residency, Syjuco is beginning a larger initiative to build a nationwide archive of post-industrial rubble. The first phase of this project, unveiled at Haverford College, engages Lancaster Avenue as a pilot site for collection and reflection. Lancaster Avenue serves as a key pathway, linking our campus to the Philadelphia metropolitan area. (The College’s front gate and official address is located on Lancaster Avenue, inviting purposeful consideration on our role as “neighbors” to those who reside on and traverse this sprawling, seventy mile street.) When studying the corridor, however, we see the uneven results

rubble and debris, they firmly mapped the campus, and in turn themselves, into the Greater Philadelphia region. To complement this cross-curricular process, Syjuco’s project also included site visits along the corridor, a feedback session with 11th-grade art students from Mastery Charter School-Shoemaker Campus at their location near 52nd Street and Lancaster Avenue, an artist talk, and a series of transdivisional dialogues with professors from Haverford, Bryn Mawr, and the University of Pennsylvania. Altogether, *American Rubble* was inspired by Syjuco’s creative visions and fueled by the input of students, professors, staff, and an emerging community of collaborative stakeholders.

This catalogue references the culmination of this project into a one-night exhibition. Students from the three courses co-produced the content of this exhibition with Syjuco—two classes composed “critical postcards” exploring the sites of rubble collection, while another built a digital archive of Lancaster Avenue inspired by the dialectical, fragmentary writings of urban philosopher Walter Benjamin. Finally, the venue of this exhibition, the old Ryan Gymnasium, a building then slated for its own transformation into our campus’ future Visual Culture Arts and Media hub, also sought to stage historical inquiry on the axes of self-reflexivity and architectural reuse.

Altogether, *American Rubble* seeks to understand the physical reality of our urban present and reconsider modes of participation in shaping our civic future.



*Haverford College students examine their collaborative projects with Syjuco.*