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The Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective: Photography as Documentation, Public Participation, and Community Resistance

Amy J. Bach

Abstract

The Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective came into existence in response to a wave of public school closures in Philadelphia in 2013. This photo essay examines the birth and photographic work of this group and situates it within a larger framework of democratic participation and civic engagement.

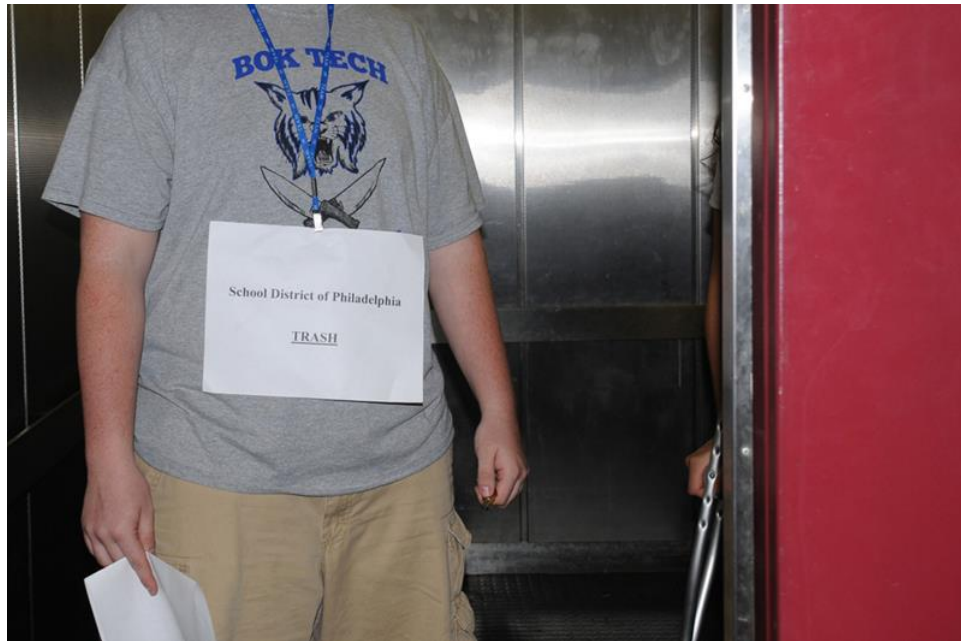


Fig. 1. An individual at Edward W. Bok Technical High School expresses a sentiment held by many (June 2013). Photo credit: Zoe Strauss, Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective member.

At the end of May in 2013, celebrated Philadelphia photographer, Zoe Strauss, took to her Facebook page and published a series of posts calling attention to the pending closure of 24 public schools throughout Philadelphia at the end of the 2012-2013 academic year. In her posts she asked for help from her network of photographers and videographers to document these schools and create a public archive that would sustain a collective memory of these public spaces before they closed for good. Many individuals responded to this call for help and organized themselves in a group called the Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective (hereafter “the Collective”). In just several weeks’ time, using photography and video, this group documented 18 of the 24 schools that were to permanently close in June of 2013. While some members produced videos of schools and the individuals who worked and studied there, photography was the principal medium of documentation of the Collective. As a result, this essay explores only the Collective’s photographic body of work, a sample of which is presented in Figures 1-10.

In providing a brief overview of the work of the Collective, this essay offers an example of one response to the wave of public school closures in Philadelphia that was unique in its development, focus, and form. This project to create a photographic and video archive of the public schools slated for closure—of the exteriors and interiors of these public buildings and of the individuals who worked and learned in them—can be understood both as an informal movement of a diverse public, as well as an act of resistance. Regardless of the individual intent of each photographer and videographer, through their visual texts the Collective inserted itself into—and contributed to—a multilayered conversation touching not just on public education and school reform, but on race and class and public investment, on urban

development, and on the nature and ownership of public space. The image above (Fig. 1), taken by Zoe Strauss, offers an appropriate entrée into an essay about one community's visual project highlighting the human and community cost of public school closures. In this photograph, an unidentifiable individual has seemingly repurposed signage used to identify materials to be discarded from a closing high school. An individual wearing a sign that reads "Trash" can be understood as a commentary on the decision to close these public schools, to the detriment of those that studied and worked in them. It can also be understood as a larger critique of market-based school reforms, which include school closures, that favor divestment in the public sphere and the privatization of social goods (Lipman 6). These reforms also reflect a shift from government to governance, where decisions of public import are made not by elected bodies accountable to their constituents but by "experts and managers" and by "judicial authority and executive order" (Lipman 13).

It is important to note that while the Collective and its body of work offer an example of a novel form of democratic engagement, it is just one example of the many different ways communities across Philadelphia protested and fought this wave of public school closures. To simply write that there was a great deal of public resistance to these closures masks the scope and depth of work done by a diverse group of individuals and organizations that protested and worked tirelessly to prevent them. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide an overview of their work, it bears acknowledgement. The Philadelphia Public School Notebook (www.thenotebook.org), an independent and non-profit news service focusing on public education in Philadelphia, provided excellent and widespread coverage of the 2013 closings and the citywide response to them.



Fig. 2. The very last graduating class of Germantown High School at the school's Great Walk event, held the evening before graduation, where graduating seniors walked around the perimeter of the school to make their final farewell. To honor the legacy of the school, which was closing just shy of its 100th year, the Germantown community, alumni, and former teachers and principals were invited to participate. Alumni speakers from every decade going back 70 years came to this event (June 2013). Photo credit: Jill Saull, Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective member.

Philadelphia's Public School Closures and the Roots of the Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective

The decision to close 24 schools was made some three months prior to Strauss' initial Facebook post by Philadelphia's School Reform Commission (SRC), an appointed five-person board that has governed the Philadelphia School District since 2001 when oversight of the city's school district was taken over by the state. Citing overarching budget constraints, facility disrepair, and a shrinking public school population due the expansion of charter schools, the 24 schools the SRC voted to shutter in June of 2013 were an assortment of elementary, middle, and high schools, many with historic roots in the city extending back nearly 100 years (Fig. 2), and all with immeasurable importance to the communities they served (Moselle). While 27 schools were actually considered for closures, the SRC ultimately voted to keep 4 of these schools open at their March 7th, 2013 vote. The final SRC vote on this day resulted in the complete closure of 23 public schools, and the merging or relocating of 5 other schools (Moselle). On April 18, 2013, the SRC voted to close an additional elementary school, bringing the total number of schools scheduled to close at the end of the 2012-2013 school year to 24 (DeNardo). Additionally, these numbers do not account for the public schools that were closed by the SRC in previous years. In 2012 the SRC closed 8 schools (Denvir; Herold).

The decision to close these 24 schools was guided by a controversial report produced by the management consulting firm, The Boston Consulting Group (BCG), which was hired by the SRC to provide guidance for overhauling a district in severe financial trouble and plagued by poor student performance (Herold). Funds to pay for BCG's services came from private donors and the specific recommendations made in the report were not immediately available to the general public. Details of the scope of the proposed changes outlined in BCG's plan were only revealed when they were obtained by local news sources under Pennsylvania's Right to Know law (Ibid.). A series of community meetings were held by the SRC allowing individuals the opportunity to present evidence against the closing of a particular school. Many, however, questioned the utility of these meetings, believing the decision to close schools was a foregone conclusion that could not be changed, regardless of testimonies given or evidence presented.

Located almost entirely in low-income minority communities, the 24 schools that were closed in 2013 primarily displaced low-income students of color, sending them mostly to other schools that, research shows, performed no better academically than their shuttered ones (Research for Action, Appendix A) and created "education deserts" in high-need city neighborhoods (Simon). These facts caused some to draw comparisons between current school reform efforts and the failed "urban renewal" policies of the recent past, which similarly decimated urban neighborhoods and displaced low-income minority residents without any direct benefit to them (Ibid.). The SRC's decision to enact this massive wave of closures put Philadelphia on a path traveled by other major cities in the Northeast and Midwest that have similarly experienced large-scale school closures in the recent past. Over the past fifteen years, Chicago; Detroit; Kansas City, MO; Milwaukee; Pittsburgh; and Washington, DC have experienced large-scale public school closings (Philadelphia Research Initiative 7). Critics of these closures, and of other market-based school reforms more broadly, have argued these are attempts by conservative and moneyed interest to dismantle public systems of education (Fine 2, 3; Lipman 144-145).

Photographer Zoe Strauss' call to action on her Facebook page for help creating a public archive of closing schools is how the idea for the Collective first came into being. Strauss, however, repeatedly insisted that this project was not hers; it was rather a collective effort requiring the initiative of all those who wanted to participate. The thread of posts on the Collective's group page on Facebook that Strauss created to organize this project offer evidence of this collaboration that was headed by no one person and grew organically from the different contributions of its members. The initial posts on this thread document the Collective from its inception as one person's idea, to several people joining the conversation and taking up organizing responsibilities, to many people posting and participating in different ways.



Fig. 3. Keeping the place nice. Faded inspirational mural on Robert Fulton Elementary School's exterior red brick façade, framed by interior lace curtains in one of its classroom's windows (June 2013). Photo credit: Jill Saull, Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective member.

Membership to the Collective's group page on Facebook quickly grew as the school closing project was shared across social media sites and was announced by several independent media outlets in the city. As word spread, the Collective came to include not only artists and professional photographers and videographers, but also amateurs, as well as public school students and their teachers, administrators, nurses and parents; public school advocates and activists; community organizers; independent media journalists; writers and poets; academics; and Philadelphians who were interested in the issue, many of them concerned about the state of public education in their city. The project to document the closure of these schools quickly took on a life of its own and was shaped by the unique visions and contributions of its members (Fig. 3). At the time of this writing, the Collective has 225 members on its Facebook group page. Only about thirty of these members took photographs or videos of the closing schools and posted them to the online platforms that housed the Collective's work. (This number is an estimate, as photographs and videos were posted photos on several online platforms, one of which is no longer accessible.)

Many more members participated in the school closing project by using the group's Facebook page as a type of informational bulletin board. The posts to this page ranged from sharing local and national news articles addressing public school closures in Philadelphia and beyond, to information about upcoming protests throughout the city in support of public education, to local news articles and posts by community members about the city's plans for selling and developing closed public schools, among others.

Visual Dimensions of the Project

The Collective's singular mission was to document the schools slated for closures in order to create a visual and public archive of these public spaces. There were no guidelines provided to members to shape their photos or videos or otherwise help them accomplish this task. Each of these individuals brought a different lens to this project that shaped the images they produced of the closing schools.

Access also shaped the body of work that Collective members produced. Gaining access to the schools in order to photograph their interiors and the spaces in use by the people who worked and studied in them was a difficult process. The initial posts on the Collective's Facebook page document the depth of consideration members gave to the issue of consent, as well as the lengths they went to secure it. The threads of posts on this topic developed into thoughtful and complicated conversations that ranged from the ethical, (i.e. the responsibility of photographers and videographers to their subjects) to the practical (e.g. sharing useful information collected from conversations with the district's Office of Communication about the process of securing consent).



Fig. 4. This grim exterior shot of Alexander Wilson Elementary School was photographed prior to the end of the school year, while the school was still open and in use (June 2013). Photo credit: Steve Minicola, Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective member.



Fig. 5. Non-functioning water fountain showing years of decay at University City High School. This photograph was taken prior to the end of the school year while the school was still open and in use (June 2013). Photo credit: Pilar Berguido, Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective member.

Without official permission, many Collective members resorted to taking only exterior building shots or interior shots outside of regular school hours. Absent the vibrant faces of students, teachers, and staff, evidence of severe neglect and decay was in plain sight and the images produced often depicted schools as products of disinvestment (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). These photos raise questions about the city and state's commitment to educating its youth—specifically, its low-income youth of color—and provide visual evidence to support claims of the consistent and continual underfunding of public education in one of the largest urban school districts in the U.S.

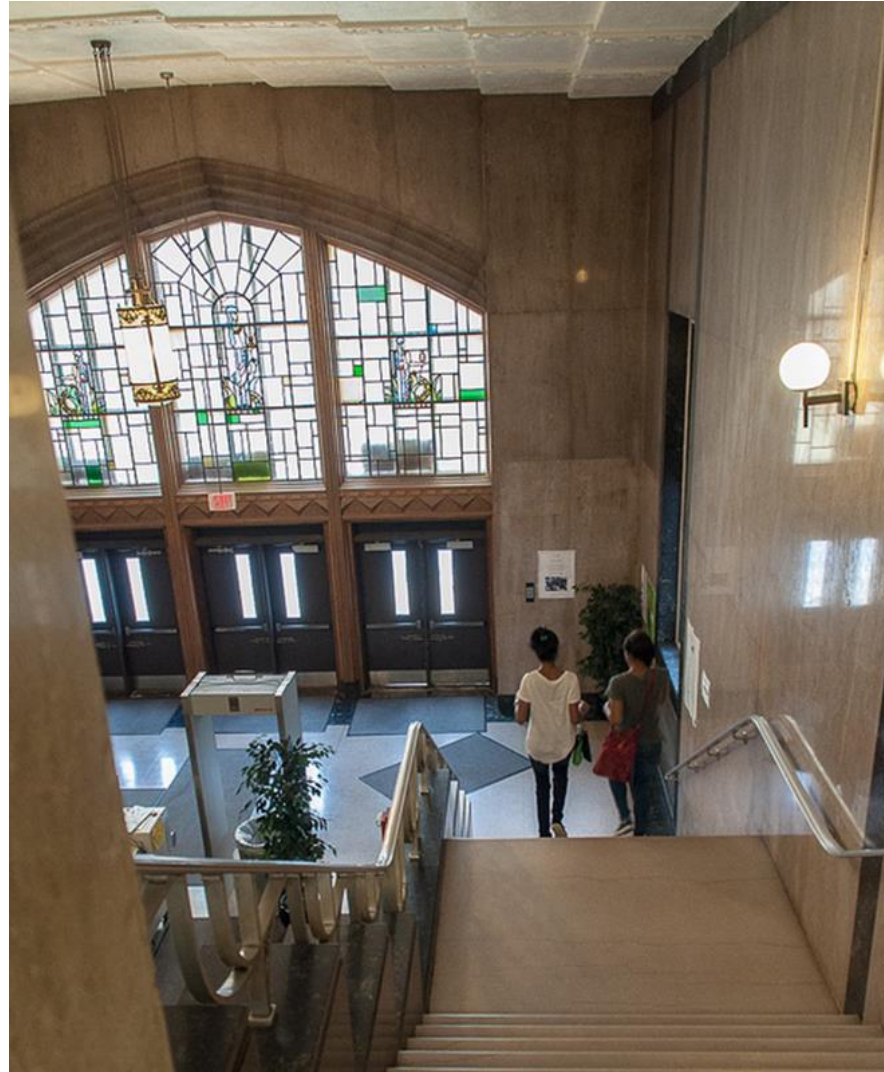


Fig. 6. Vaux High School entrance juxtaposes grand public architecture with metal detectors (June 2013). Photo credit: Tieshka Smith, Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective member.

Other photographs by Collective members document once-grand public spaces with rich architectural histories (half of the schools closed in June of 2013 were on the National Registry of Historic Places), (Fig. 6). These photos seem to reveal a different value ascribed onto public space, one that is mirrored in the turn-of-the-century craftsmanship used in the building of grand public courthouses, train stations, post offices, firehouses, and parks. Arguably, these images document what can only be understood as a shift in cultural attitudes about public spaces and raise questions about how we, as a society, understand and invest in public schooling today. The juxtaposition of modern-day additions, such as metal detectors, to these historic buildings reflect not just unfortunate realities of urban schooling today, but raise questions about the criminalization of urban youth in the very institutions charged with supporting their development.



Fig. 7. Communications Technology High School's gymnasium repurposed as a storage unit, housing boxes of school books to be relocated. This photo was taken prior to the end of the school year while school was still in open and in use (June 2013). Photo credit: Amy Bach, Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective member.



Fig. 8. Leidy Elementary School children help clear out their own school (June 2013). Photo credit: Lori Waselchuk, Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective member.

Still other photographs by the Collective call attention to the massive logistical and physical work involved in closing 24 schools and reallocating their resources, both human and material, to other places. Photographs of boxes filling entire school gymnasiums (Fig. 7), piles of discarded equipment and

books, overflowing school dumpsters, and uncomfortable images of students involved in the work of moving their own schools (Fig. 8) raise questions about the efficiency of this massive endeavor and the waste produced.

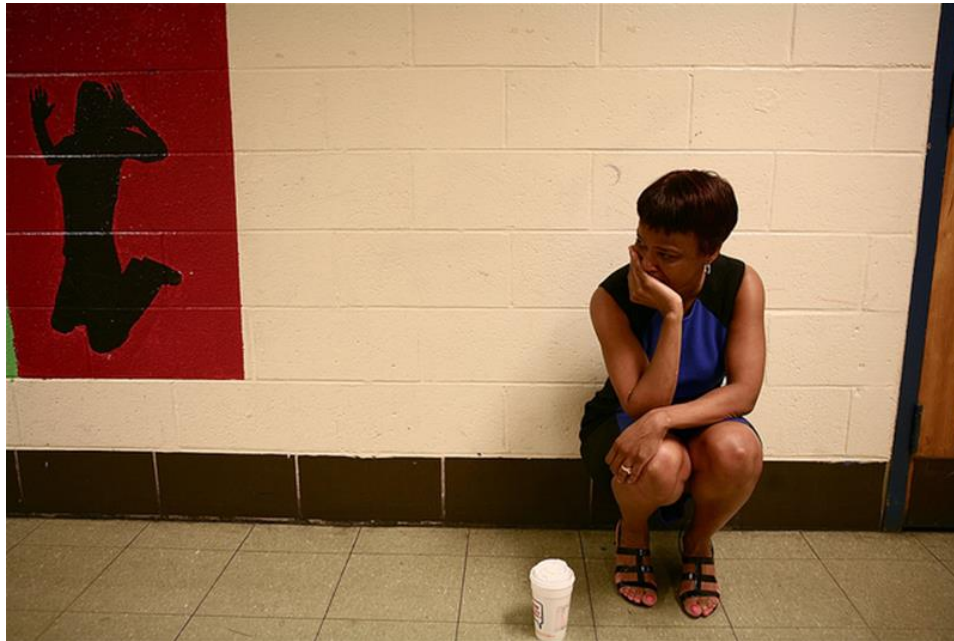


Fig. 9. The principal of Fairhill Elementary School sheds tears over its closing (June 2013). Harvey Finkle, Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective member.



Fig. 10. Teaching until the very end at Walter G. Smith Elementary School (June 2013). Photo credit: Matt Stanley, Philadelphia School Closing Collective member.

Several Collective members were able to negotiate entry into schools and were given permission to take photographs and videos of the teachers,

students, and staff members going about their daily business of teaching, learning, and working. In capturing moments of frustration (Fig. 1) or sadness (Fig. 9) or engagement between students and their teachers (Fig. 10), or in documenting teachers and students decorating their schools (Fig. 3) and celebrating them even as they are closing (Fig. 2), these photographs map faces onto the subject of school closures and reveal the human element of education that is forgotten in an educational climate where discussions about education are often reduced to standardized test scores. These images offer an important counter-narrative to the market-based discourse of efficiency used to justify school closures and they also complicate the deficit labels used to describe those schools slated for closure, and the students they served.

Socio-Political Implications of the Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective

Both the Collective as an entity, and the work it produced, offer an example of a novel form of democratic participation and an act of resistance in the public domain. The body of work produced by the Collective offers a unique perspective for understanding the public school closures in Philadelphia. Whether capturing the architectural history of a school, or a moment of student engagement, or a decaying facade or hallway or classrooms, the act of making a photograph and presenting it publically becomes an act of defiance, or resistance. Making public images of public spaces that are about to be discarded is not a neutral endeavor. The Collective created a permanent and public body of work that offers visual evidence of a topic Philadelphia's School Reform Commission would prefer people not look at and it contributes to a debate they would prefer were over. Regardless of the individual intent that drove their participation in the school closing project, through the images they produced Collective members have continued the conversation about public school closures long after the schools they photographed had been shuttered. The work of the Collective is also important because it continues to shed light on a decision of public significance that was not transparent or made with public consent. In this way, the Collective offers a novel example of democratic participation in an age of neoliberal governance and market-based school reform policies.

Through their photographs and videos, the Collective inserted itself into a conversation in which they were not invited to participate and they took that conversation to places and people that weren't anticipated. Photographs taken by Collective members have been used in collaboration with public school advocacy work around the city of Philadelphia and also nationally. Collective members' photos have been shared across online platforms, in gallery exhibitions, in academic conferences, and picked up by local and national news outlets to accompany news stories on public schooling.

People take photographs in order to remember. The photographs produced by the Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective create a visual and public record that contributes to a collective memory of the public schools that were closed in Philadelphia in June of 2013.

Note 1: The author is a member of the Philadelphia School Closing Photo Collective, however, the ideas expressed in this essay are the author's alone and do not represent the positions of the Collective or its individual members in any way.

Note 2: The Collective's online archive of photographs and videos is now only partially available. At the time of this writing the main website that hosted the Collective's body of work is no longer active. The Collective's Tumblr page:

<http://schoolclosingcollective.tumblr.com>, remains active, but houses only some of the photographs the Collective produced. The Collective's Facebook group page primarily served as an organizational bulletin board for the project but houses some photographs as well. This group is titled "Phila School Closings Photo Collective" and content can be viewed after requesting and being given membership to the group. Collective members also posted photos to their individual Instagram accounts and some professional photographers published their school closing photos on their websites. Additional photographs from the school closing project were published by Hidden City Philadelphia and can be viewed at: <http://hiddencityphila.org/2013/10/phillys-school-closings-captured-by-local-photographers/>. The author is in the process of locating all photographs of the school closures taken by members of the Collective and finding a permanent home for them.

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