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THE DOOR KNOCKER

A Sensory Archaeology

The Door Opens:

A PROLOGUE

There was no door bell at 98 Benefit Street. Just a brass door knocker.

I followed my procedure of documentation: I stepped back, framed the knocker in my camera, and took a photograph. Then I pulled my little audio recorder out, and pressed record:

"This is 98," I recited, and held the recorder up to the knocker.

With my free hand, I reached out, lifted the knocker, and let it fall three times. Three knocks resounded along the street.

Quickly, I turned off the recorder, and pulled out a piece of paper with ten questions I had prepared for people living with door knockers. I had ten copies of these questions in my bag, but up until this afternoon, I hadn't needed them. No one had been home yet on Benefit Street, and I had just six blocks left to go.

But this house was different. This house didn't have a door bell. Every other house on the street thus far had supplied a door bell alongside the door knocker. It had felt strangely schizophrenic to me, a case of two identities competing for primacy. And the tension was not lost on me; every time I stepped up to a door, lifted the knocker, and let it fall three times, I wondered if I should have used the door bell instead. When no one responded to the knocker, I usually pushed the doorbell and held it for a few seconds, just as a final check.

No one ever answered.

Until 98.

The door cracked open. A woman asked what I wanted. Stumbling through a short speech I had rehearsed for this scenario, I explained that I was a student at Brown doing a project on door knockers. Would she mind if I asked her some questions about her door knocker?

She didn't believe me.

She asked me what class this research was for. She asked where I was from, what year I was, what I was majoring in.

I tried to respond in a way that would give her the confidence she needed. But she was still skeptical.

And then her cat escaped through the door.

She gasped. She explained that the cat had never been outside before. She begged me to catch him.

So I put down my door knocker survey and my pen, and crept towards the cat on the brick sidewalk of Benefit Street.

Fortunately, I caught the cat. I picked him up, and handed him over to his owner.

And in that moment, something changed. The woman trusted me. She opened up the door wide enough for me to enter.

"So you want to know about the door knocker?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Alright then," she responded, "come on in."

See: A Visual Theory of Door Knockers

In 1990, an architecture critic named Stanley Abercrombie wrote that "our first encounter of any interior is the result of our entrance into it, a movement from outside to inside" (Abercrombie 5). He is wrong of course. By the time we actually enter a building, we have encountered it extensively from the exterior, and that exterior cannot be divorced for the experience, expectations and organizations of the interior it feigns to mask. To the contrary, the exterior of a building is as a much a site for the transmission of a building's interior as it might also be a covering up or a misdirection. Window panes on the exterior, for instance, give away the locations of light sources on the interior, and the positions of exterior door ways can be said to convey understandings of how one might move into and through interior spaces.

So the doorway thus becomes an important clue to the contents of the interior of a building. It also, perhaps more importantly, acts a space of demarcation, separating the interior from the exterior, but not without imparting a sense of both into the other. "An entrance is a physical transition point, obviously, and also a mental one," wrote Abercrombie in his Philosophy of Interior Design, "the entrant bringing into the interior memories of the exterior and expectations based on those memories" (Abercrombie 7).

If we could amend Abercrombie's understanding of the door, it would critical that one add the fact that a doorway is more than a physical and a mental transition point, it is also a visual transition point. While this paper cannot possibly engage the theoretical and historical understandings of the door needed to draw out this point, suffice it to say that a doorway is generally made to visually distinct from the façade it is embedded within, and in this visual differentiation achieves a somewhat symbolic value. Its otherness, represented visually as well as physically, articulates its purpose and importance. If a wall might be said to express a stand-fastness, then the doorway speaks to a pliability, an opportunity of entrance and exit.

So let us stop then, before we follow Abercrombie into the interior, and stand on the street or corridor, staring at the door. Our visual engagement is generally our first engagement with a thing, and it is all to quickly over-looked by Abercrombie's argument that the entrance is the experience, not the visual recognition of the opportunity to enter. And more. As Mary Harrod Northend wrote in 1921, the door can be a visual symbol of wealth, class, occupation, experience, history and identity. She asked, "Is [a door] merely an entrance or does it represent a decorative feature?" and wondered "could it but speak, what wonderful tales it might relate, for is it not symbolic of the most dramatic scenes in life?" (Northend 1). These are certainly things to think about before we push the door aside and enter.

It is with this grounding in the idea of the door as a physical, mental and now visual transition point, that we might first come see the door knocker. Alongside her claims for the door as a central mediation of personal identity, class, and history, Mary Northend also believed that the door represented "the focal center of the façade of a home" and if this is true, then the door knocker is the focal center of a door (Northend 1). This certainly came out in my own fieldwork, as in over 60 door knockers documenter on Benefit Street in Providence, Rhode Island, only one was located off the center vertical axis of its door. Additionally, all of these centrally aligned door knockers had been hung on the door between four and five and half feet from the their bases, a height which roughly corresponds to the idea of 'eye level.' So what emerges, in this study of the door, is that the door knocker is firstly (but not necessarily primarily) a visual object.

The impetus to engage the door knocker as a visual object does not only derive from its placement on a door, but also in terms of its design and construction. According to Mary

Northend, American colonial knockers began as pragmatic objects, whose design was simple and utilitarian, but quickly gave way to "the hammer type and late on [to] human figures and animal heads" (Northend 9). "The knocker" as Northend explains, "was the chief outlet of the metal designer's ingenuity for there were no bells in those days and the knocker symbolized welcome" (Northend). Here, we see two traces of the knocker as a visual object. The first trace is the fact that the knocker was an object crafted by a "metal designer" (my italics) suggesting that a knocker's shape and form were considered alongside functional values. The second trace is Northend's use of the word "symbolized," which emphasizes the fact that in Colonial America, the knocker possessed a visual and symbolic value in addition to its practical purpose.

These critical arguments and explanations for the door knocker as a visual object were further manifested in fieldwork on Providence's Benefit Street. In several interviews with residents whose homes had door knockers, I was told that the door knocker gave the home a certain "historical" characteristic. When I followed up on this suggestion, many residents told me that the knocker meant the home was old or original, and thus acted as a symbol of authenticity. This was all the more interesting when I discovered that many of these same door knockers were not original, but had been hung, 'with historical consideration' to suggest the originals. Even more shocking is that this historical retrofitting of door knockers is something that has been going on for almost a century, as Mary Northend wrote about "knockers… being replaced, not for use as in olden times, but for ornament" in the 1920's. (Northend 10). In any case, the impulse for Benefit Street home owners to apply the door knocker to their doors to create a sense of authenticity certainly points once again to the immense value of the knocker as a visual object.

Even without talking to owners and residents, it was clear that the door knockers had rich visual qualities and implications. One experience of the power of the knocker as a visual object, came from that one exceptional door knocker that was not placed along a vertical axis of its door. This knocker was found on a split doorway, which by and large, lacked knockers because they did not have any adequate structural support. Benefit Street has many split doorways, and yet only this one had knockers attached. On either side of the doorway's central split, at about waist height, a knocker had been attached to the door. As only one was necessary, it appears that two were placed on the door to give it a harmonized visual symmetry. Observing this door, it became clear to me that only the right hand knocker had been used extensively, because it was well worn to a polish, while the knocker on the left has long since oxidized over.

A series of two pineapple door knockers on the streets led me to consider the knocker as a symbolic form in its own right. The pineapple has traditionally been associated with hospitality and prosperity in the state of Rhode Island, and thus these door knockers became brass articulations of that same spirit, by means of a local visual semiotics. Some other exceptional knockers included a revolver attached to a door, whose military implications may have once symbolized the occupation of the resident there (a soldier, or member of the armed forces) or the building's own history (as an arsenal, or military office). One woman also told me that she had picked a specific lionhead knocker for her home because it was the same knocker as the one at 10 Downing Street in London, the home of the United Kingdom's prime minister. This example is a fascinating counter to the local symbolic value of the pineapple, as it posits the door knocker as a site for visual links with distant geographic and political entities, a door knocker as a global visual symbol.

When we look at door knockers, we engage them as symbols and visual objects as much as we consider the ways in which they are more than things to be seen. The visual meanings of these objects, as exemplified by my fieldwork and research, reveals the mulitiplicity of meanings that can be associated with these knockers. Because the ephemerality of meaning in symbolic

systems, the meaning of the knockers as visual objects is constantly shifting. Where the pineapple knockers may have once meant welcome, today they may just be symbols of authenticity for their residents and visitors. It would be unfortunate if these symbolic, ornamental, and visual values were taken to be superficial. This is because the door knocker has been a visual object since it's invention and popularization. What is more important then, is to judge the shifting of these visual meanings, and wonder how relate to the value of the knocker as a whole. For instance, while we might be tempted to see the development of the electric door bell as the ultimate end for the knocker as a practical object, and the beginning of it being developed into simply a visual object, we might just as soon see that inflection point as a the rebirth of the door knocker as a visual symbol because of the choice to include it with or in place of the door bell.

Touch:
A Phenomenology of The Knocker

The Door Knocker is not an image, and in many ways, the engagement of the knocker as a "visual object" sets up what Michael Shanks has called the "fallacy of representation" (Shanks 17). This is because in analyzing the door knocker as a symbol, or a semiotic signifier, one ignores its capacity to also be a signified value, a meaning as well as a sign. A door knocker, as Shanks would argue, "is both signifier and signified. An artifact operates in both ways" (Shanks 18). Along these rhetorical lines, we might ask, 'what is a door knocker other than a door knocker?' inviting the conclusion that to describe a door knocker would be to reduce it to elements the comprise it, but are not it. Only as an indivisible signifier/signified can door knocker-ness really be expressed.

I am arguing for us to stop staring at the door knocker from the street. It is time for me to put down my camera and walk up to the door. It is time to touch the knocker. To lift it, consider its physicality. Already, the commitment to engaging the knocker as a physical, tactile, nonsymbolic but material object causes the consideration that in approaching a knocker, one progresses further into what feels like private space. It is no longer from the distance of observation that we can engage the object. Instead, the somatic experience of approaching the knocker forces the displacement of the viewer. In fact, the movement fundamentally changes the status of the viewer, as the displacement causes a rupture in the subject. As we reach out to touch the knocker, we become hybridized tactile viewers, complicating our relationship to the knocker, by engaging it along a new sensory dimension.

One might begin the phenomenology of a door knocker, by considering this exact approach. Before we may touch the knocker, before we may lift it to knock, we must approach the door along a certain pathway. While one might take a photograph of a knocker, from a distance, there can be no avoiding the need to confront a certain intimacy to touch a knocker. This closeness, governed by the placement of the knocker, and personal physiology, create a fascinating relationship between the subject and the object. If the knocker is placed high on a door for instance, and one was short, then it might prove impossible to reach up and grab the knocker. This would mean that a child's engagement with a door might be fundamentally different than an adult's experience. Unable to reach the knocker, a visiting child might knock with his fist on the door. And perhaps this would be considered by the home owner or resident, who might differentiate between these types of knocks, which were pre-differentiated by the physicality of the knocker-visitor relationship.

Again, we might come back to the example of the well-worn door knocker, placed alongside a much less used alternative. Here, there is a trace of physical interaction, denoting a certain pattern of use. This example is a rich phenomenological opportunity. Why would the door knocker to

the right of a door be more worn than a knocker on the left? Perhaps it is because more visitors were right handed. And if this is true, than the tactile trace of physical experiences allows for an archaeology of a community, and analysis of the individuals using this pair of door knockers.

The question of choice in these sorts of phenomenological experiences can also be considered within the 'door knocker – door bell' binary. In my interviews with residents on Benefit Street, I found a wide range of experiences with how visitors dealt with the option (or lack of an option) between the knocker and the bell. A few residents told me that people often used the door knockers to announce their arrival, but generally this was these homes did not have door bells. In homes with door bells, people generally tried the door bell first, then resorted to the knocker if they had no response for the knocker. Two separate home owners explained that they had disconnected their door bells out of preference for the knockers, but that visitors still went for the bell first, before using the knocker.

These findings, when viewed alongside the research already presented on the knocker as visual object, confirm to some degree the contemporary experience of the door knocker as a more ornamental object that practical. At least, it seems that the door bell is preferred to the door knocker among visitors, for whatever reason. Some residents with working door bells in addition to door knockers, also told me that they were often surprised when visitors tried the door knocker first. It seems that these individuals were prepared for the use of the door bell, but unprepared for the use of the knocker. Often there was a practical reason for this predisposition: many of these residents lived in houses with multiple apartments, and the door bells specified which apartment a visitor was interested in, while the knocker left residents wondering not only who was at the door, but who they were there for.

Touching the door knockers could also reveal the importance that the knockers had for the owners, residents, or caretakers. Several knockers were in had been poorly maintained, and not surprisingly, no one answered those doors. Other knockers were well maintained, and their owners were both quick and excited to talk about them. So it became possible, simply by touching a knocker, to estimate the kind of response one could get about the knockers, their use, and their values to home owners, simply by touching them. Additionally, some knockers were well lubricated or used, and liftly freely. Others were hard to lift, and seemed somewhat jammed in certain positions. Again, these physical traits, experienced through touch, revealed how often the knockers were used. Not surprisingly, knockers that were somewhat rusted over, and hard to loosen in order to lift, were not used often according to their owners.

So we find a new dimension to the understanding of the door knocker. As an tactile object, we add depth to the visual qualities of the knocker, and imagine it as not only a image or symbol, but an experienced reality. The question of the subject (specifically the visitor) is interestingly represented by the consideration of the tactile experience of a door knocker. This is because the materiality of a knocker, revealed by the touch a subject, is deeply embedded in somatic experience, the embodied process of sensing occurring in the visitor/subject who reaches out to touch, lift, and ultimately knock with this object. It is this quality of the door knocker, this capacity for the knocker to serve as a physical mediation of visitation, that is represented in the feel of the knocker, and translated into the further complicated (and understanding) of the thing.

Hear: The Audible Articulation of Visitation

We have looked at, and lifted the knocker. When we let it fall, there is a sound, a knock to be specific. But here, an interesting question suddenly envelops our tactile-visual understanding of the door knocker. This is the question of the

value of the door knocker's knock, the potential of the tactile experience of the knocker to produce an audible value. Does the knocker own this knock? Is this knock the knocker? Does this knock represent a part of it's unique construction, experience, and identity? Or is the knock mere a potential production, rooted in the visiting subject, who (what) causes the object to articulate this quality?

We lift the knocker again. And let it fall. There is another sound. Another knock.

Whatever the door knocker is, the knock cannot be divorced from it. A knocker that does not knock is not a not a knocker. In this capacity, it is critical that we engage the knocker along a new sensory dimension: the experience of sound and hearing. Jonathan Sterne, a professor of Communication at the University of Pittsburgh has said that it is impossible to think or define sound and hearing without engaging with the idea of the human. As he wrote in 2003, "human beings reside at the center of any meaningful definition of sound" (Sterne 11). For us, this serves to complicate our understanding of the knock rather than to simplify it. Because the knock is fundamentally a sound, and Sterne argues that the definition (and thus experience) of sound is ultimately human, than in many ways the knock only exists as a discrete object in the experience of an individual.

This brings back to our previous studies in the door knocker as a visual and tactile object. Just as it was impossible to separate the human seeing or touching a knocker from the idea of the knocker, we now must consider the knock as an experience impossible without a human subject. More challenging perhaps, is the fact that this knock, this sound, is the first value we have which must be shared between subjects. In order for the door knocker to be fulfilling its purpose, it must produce a sonic value that is perceived not only by the individual that made it, but the individual to whom it is sent or loosely addressed. The knock, it follows, is a form of communication, an audible communication.

For over 16 of the door knockers on Benefit Street, I made field recordings of the sound of their knocks. This was a highly problematic task, I admit, as there was no way for me to apply the same force, pace of strike, and style of knock at each door to produce an empirical, objective recording of the sounds of these door knocker's knocks. But in many ways I didn't need to. Most of the knockers sounded radically different. Some had high tinny knocks, and others long low knocks. What I discovered, was that the weight and material of the knockers contributed extensively to the type of tone they produced. Shape and form also impacted sound quality, although I have yet to find a good way to link the different sound qualities of two knockers to their shapes as sea shells or pineapples.

Perhaps more interesting that the differences between the sound of knockers, were their commonalities. If one were to run audio diagnostics on the sound clips, they would likely discover a common sonic range. In fact, one of the only major things setting the knockers apart, was the creak of their hinges rather than the sound of their knock. As we the touch of older, or more rusted knockers, I was able to connect the sound of creaky door knocker's to a lack or very limited use. Knockers that swung without creaks were either new, well maintained, or frequently used.

But what does the sound mean? In many ways, it is an artifact along Michael Shanks' definition, as an item that is both a signifier and a signified. This is because the creation of the sound, both signifies and is a signifier of a person at a door. By nature of the design of the knockers, which are too heavy to knock in the wind, the knock is the means by which one is made aware of a presence. This presence is both for the resident inside a home, who hears this presence, and the visitor himself, whose tactile engagement with the knocker serves to articulate himself. A knock does not necessarily carry any information about the identity of a visitor, and yet it may also be made to be an auditory signature of a particular identity. This is the much fetishized 'secret knock' which only has value as a specific sign when it is known by both the knocking visitor and the listening

resident.

There is a danger here of denying or ignoring the door knocker as the material mediation of this communication. Clearly this cannot be done. In the sound of a knock, there is a specific tonal quality which is imparted by the material of the knocker, it's age and maintenance, and it's size and weight. In this capacity, the door knocker is not simply a tool in the production of the knock, but a site of sound production and in fact, a major determination in the nature of the knock. If one were to have two doors at a home for instance, the knockers might have different sounds which would be readily differentiated by a resident. They might also travel differently through the home, thus revealing which door had been knocked on by the sound of the knock referring back to the location of the knocker.

It is also important that we consider that door as a part of the sound production. When the knocker is lifted, and struck, the reverberations of the strike must travel through the door, and through the open space of the hallway or room by the door. Here again, the knock proves its complex status, as a knock cannot really be said to be mediated by a knocker alone, but also by the door and the space behind it. Often, it is the space the creatures the most distinct tonal characteristics of the knock. One woman told me that because of the long hallway behind her door, the knocker always made a frighteningly loud, hard sound. "It's like the police are here," she explained.

Other home owners said that the sound of the knock could impart a sense of who was at the door, and what the nature of their business was. Some knocking styles, one resident, explained, seemed friendly while others were more businesslike. These kind of differentiations, informed by experienced perhaps more than any essential qualities of the knock, reinforce the difficult critical evaluation of the nature of the knock. Perhaps most interestingly, one Benefit Street resident told me that she generally forgets that she has a door knocker. "I don't think about it at all," she said, "until somebody knocks."

This statement confirms what might be the ultimate value of the knock to the door knocker, and the relationship it helps govern. Between a person at the door, come to visit or solicit, and a person inside, the knocker actually sounds different but points to the same thing: the door knocker itself, which in this process comes to mean the door. So the resident, walks over to the door, and "answers" it. And this act, this completing of the circuit, helps us see the knock as a speaking, an articulation, a communication. And what these ultimately means for the door knocker, is that as practical object, embedded with a network of uses, meanings, and symbolic values, we too can knock on the door, and see who or what will answer.

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EPILOGUE:
Ebenezer Scrooge as Archaeologist

> *Now, it is a fact, that there was nothing at all particular about the knocker on the door, except that it was very large. It is also a fact, that Scrooge had seen it, night and morning, during his whole residence in that place; also that Scrooge had as little of what is called fancy about him as any man in the city of London, even including -- which is a bold word -- the corporation, aldermen, and livery. Let it also be borne in mind that Scrooge had not bestowed one thought on Marley, since his last mention of his seven years' dead partner that afternoon. And then let any man explain to me, if he can, how it happened that Scrooge, having his key in the lock of the door, saw in the knocker, without its undergoing any intermediate process of change -- not a knocker, but Marley's face.*
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> *Marley's face. It was not in impenetrable shadow as the other objects in the yard were, but had a dismal light about it, like a bad lobster in a dark cellar. It was not angry or ferocious, but looked at Scrooge as Marley used to look: with ghostly spectacles turned up on its ghostly forehead. The hair was curiously stirred, as if by breath or hot air; and, though the eyes were wide open, they were perfectly motionless. That, and its livid colour, made it horrible; but its horror seemed to be in spite of the face and beyond its control, rather than a part or its own expression.*
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> *As Scrooge looked fixedly at this phenomenon, it was a knocker again.*
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> ***- A Christmas Carol,* Charles Dickens**

The archaeologist of the door knocker becomes like Ebenezer Scrooge in his experience before his own knocker. In the critical examination, the door knocker changes suddenly in front of our eyes from a thing we "know" to something troublingly foreign. It takes on a new character. It becomes the site of relationships and social values, symbolic and somatic meanings, and a multiplicity of sensory experiences. It changes from a thing, into a series of things, many of which we did not expect. Put simply, in the study of the door knocker as a critical thing, the door knocker comes to life and shifts form.

When we look again, like Scrooge, we see the door knocker again. But it can never just be a door knocker anymore.

And when Scrooge finally opens the door, he cannot shake the sensation that he took for granted has been destabilized as a fixed meaning. This is the semiotic crisis of shifting meanings beneath shifting signs, and it is this crisis, this peril of unknowing what you already "know" that is the most rewarding and necessary component of the study of things.