Visual Block

Richie Wireman's Exhibit digs into downtown

By David Schankula

It's 11:30 on a Tuesday night and Richie Wireman is in his home office — half living room, half photo studio. He is clipping shards of china with a pair of pliers and arranging the pieces across a seven foot wooden frame. The wood was salvaged from the The Dame. The china is from the late 1800s. It came out of the Earth and with the dirt washed off, the blue details are again gleaming.

From his computer comes the sound of destruction. It is the rumble of heavy machinery, of rock and brick crumbling together. A truck is backing up, its plaintive beeping grows closer and closer, its big engine gets louder and then it dumps its load, pouring remains of the buildings that stood at the center of Lexington into a cacophonous pile. It's a jarring noise. It is unpleasant. It is what happened.

For the past five years, Richie Wireman has documented the Dame Block. He has taken over 10,000 photographs inside the businesses and on the sidewalks surrounding them. In the summer of 2008 when Dudley Webb got the permit to demolish the buildings, Richie showed up to take the pictures.

"I knew I had to document it," he is saying now, as his cat rolls around oblivious in a pile of discarded pottery shavings. John Conley, president of Diversified Demolition, had invited Richie inside the fences for a closer look. "They'd already torn down Rosenberg's and they were digging. It was 10AM and they started hitting piles of bottles — pop bottles, apothecary bottles. People used to dump everything in the ground beneath the outhouses. All through the center of the lot people had dug holes and filled them with trash. I remember looking into this hole and thinking, 'Wow! All this stuff is in the ground. Somebody has to tell this story, not just capture these images."

For four months, Richie was there taking pictures and gathering boxes of discarded items from forgotten lives. His house is a museum now. Old coke bottles, hand-blown ink wells, broken dishes, disembodied doll legs — all of it had been covered in waste and dirt for 100 years.

"The earth-movers and bulldozers would dig a hole and John and I would jump in and pull the stuff out. We were like kids. You never knew what you were going to dig up. The glass was sparkling in the light. It was amazing to be in there, fifteen feet deep, smelling the earth, getting my hands dirty."

"People would drive by and yell '[obscenities] like the guys doing the demolition were evil. But these guys were just doing their job. If it wasn't them, someone else would have done it. I watched them clean all those bricks. They clean them one by one so they can be resold. It was tedious work."

Richie recorded hours of audio. The sound of men knocking mortar off old bricks — clink, clink, clink for minutes on end — is almost hypnotic. You can hear them set one aside and reach out for another as if shuffling through a pile of heavy seashells.

"I think the audio is really disconcerting," Richie is saying as he meticulously arranges and re-arranges tiny artifacts. "It causes a sense of unease in the stomach. But now that the block is empty I think it's good to relive what happened. I know a lot of people avoid it, you know, 'I can't go look at it!' but it's good for people to see, hear and smell that process. I got almost addicted to it, every free moment I had I was down there. I felt like if I wasn't there I was missing out on something, like something was coming out of the ground and I couldn't see it."

His show is Friday, during Gallery Hop. Running out of time, he is stooped over a frame, balancing colors and shapes like it's a giant puzzle. When he is done every piece will be glued down, a photograph will be placed in the center and he'll pour in epoxy to solidify it all for good measure and posterity.

"I built all the frames by hand. They're from the beams of the Dame. I left them rough on the front just how they were. The beams were huge, they were handcut, the quality of the wood was great. Everything in the show is from the block. I wanted it to be organic."

On top of his stove sits another frame, mostly finished. It is decorated with nails. After the buildings were gone, the crew from Diversified brought in a giant magnet and sucked the nails out of the rubble. "I just filled a whole box with them. That's what held these buildings together."

But not everything Richie Wireman salvaged was pulled from the ground. He has boxes and boxes of stuff that was

forgotten inside the buildings. There's a pool triangle from Buster's, of course, but also the danger tape that surrounded the block. An old photo album from the remains of Club 141 shows two couples stuck forever in a line dance, their pants pulled up to their bellybuttons.

There's a letter opener and a pair of scissors rusted shut and piles of old posters and brochures.

a letter to local businesses touting its direct mail services. It opened with the question "What do worms do in winter?" and directly to the right was just that... a worm, freakishly glued to the page. "Take another look at him!" the letter implores. "Doesn't he look like a badly slumped sales curve?" And he does. He's nosediving. Like a stock market. "TRY AN INTENSIVE DIRECT MAIL PROGRAM!"

There's an old dressing room sign with a buxom blonde

in the privy and now I have it. Dishes and plates that people ate on, and now it's in my living room. It served a purpose. It meant a lot to them. A trace of an era that's gone. They're all dead, but now it's a part of art." Earlier this year in an interview with WKYT, Lexington's Mayor, Jim Newberry, bristled at critical questions about the Dame Block. "Nothing of consequence ever happened on that block," he said.

Perhaps Mayor Newberry was right after all. Richie

Nearly every day for four months, Richie was on the block taking pictures and gathering boxes of discarded items from forgotten lives. His house is a museum now. Old coke bottles, hand blown ink wells, broken dishes, disembodied doll legs, all of it had been covered in waste and dirt for 100 years.

On April 25th, 1919, eighteen heavy blue coats arrived from the Hamilton Garhart Cotton Mills in Detroit. It cost $33.75 for the set. In accordance with the child

labor law of 1916, the bill announces, no kids were used in the coats' production. There's a drawing of the company's austere factory, sitting beside a river and churning out smoke. Like this block, that place is gone now.

An old copy of American Laundry Digest, dated September 9th, 1955, offers a two page color advertisement from The Prosperity Company of Syracuse, NY. "Modern packaging for modern products." Six years later, Prosperity would be sold, its factory closed and all its employees laid off.

A hefty pamphlet from Northwestern Life Insurance Company, 1952, includes a spread sheet to "figure it yourself." Selling the worries of death, it asks: "HOW WILL YOUR ESTATE MEET THESE OBLIGATIONS?"

Another small catalog arrived with 1.5 cent postage, peddling a $27.95 hand gun. "Perfect for all casual shooting."

The Bell Printing Company at 301 West Short Street sent

in pig tails riding a nuclear bomb, a la Dr. Strangelove, and there's the official program of The Lexington Fair, beginning August 29th, 1893. The Fair took place at the Red Mile. On

page 18, about midway through, there is a picture of the Clarendon Hotel — "Headquarters for everybody." — which once stood at 21 N. Limestone.

On the program's back page there is one last ad. It is for The Phoenix Hotel, "the largest and best hotel in Lexington." The Phoenix Hotel was demolished almost a hundred years later in 1981 when businessman and future Governor Wallace Wilkinson announced plans for a 41-story skyscraper — the World Coal Center. By 1983, Wilkinson still hadn't found money for his project so he joined forces with the Webb Companies "to provide extra leverage to obtain public money," as the Herald-Leader reported at the time. The partnership lasted a year, the money didn't come and the Webbs took their part of the plan — a downtown mall anchored by two department stores — and moved down the street to build Festival Market. Wilkinson's skyscraper never left the drawing board and in 1985 the city paved over his rubbled block in anticipation of the coming throngs of the NCAA Tournament. Today, Phoenix Park is still there and across the street is the grassy field of the Dame Block.

"I want people to think about what was on this block," Richie Wireman is saying. He holds up a piece of a plate. "Probably some kid was eating dinner and he broke the dish, you know. 'Oh damn, Johnny, you just broke that!' or maybe he didn't want his mom to know so he ran out and threw it

Wireman has boxes and boxes of trash from a century of people and he is assembling it around photographs he has taken over the past five years. Photos of bands and dancers, of revelers and just us people, the ones who are still here. For now, at least. He has pictures of the buildings coming down, and

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THE BLOCK WHERE THIS HAPPENED

Richie Wireman's VISUAL BLOCK
Gallery Hop, 11.20.09
Above Bellini's Restaurant
5:30 pm to 8:30 pm
Live music from Willie Eames and Dave Farris
Photographs of the Dame Block as it was and as it is. Each frame constructed from remnants of the buildings and decorated with artifacts salvaged from the ground. ■

HOUSES FOR RENT

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"Community is more than just a building, it's more than just entertainment. People are used to a soundbite, this consumption of media, but there's a lot more to history if you stop and dig in the ground. I think everybody should just go dig. It makes you think about the past and the future."

— Richie Wireman

the lot as it has changed since the buildings were removed.

On Friday night at the Gallery Hop, Richie Wireman will fill the space above Bellini's Restaurant with these giant frames. Hundreds of other photos will be projected onto the wall. The room will be decorated with artifacts: Old letters, inventories of second-hand engagement rings, on and on it goes.

that's not relevant to a lot of people now. But is what happens now relevant in ten years or a hundred? Community is more than just a building, it's more than just entertainment. There's a lot more to history if you stop and dig in the ground. I think everybody should go dig. It makes you think about the past and the future. It makes you think about your kids — are they going to be up at a bar on top of CentrePointe getting drunk? Are they going to feel connected?"

Local musicians Willie Eames and Dave Farris will set guitar and drums to the recordings of the demolition and right out the window, just across the street from this room of little histories, you can look out at the block where it all happened.

"I hope the demolition people come," Richie says. "I want them to be there. The Webbs, Joe Rosenberg, the Mayor. I hope everyone comes. There's excitement in this and sadness. Maybe the emotion will bridge some of the bs. A lot of the dialogue has just alienated people. It's causing more rift. It's not bringing people to the table."

"People are thinking about what was there two years ago, not 100 years ago. Maybe

Richie's got too much blue. The right side of his frame has too many pieces all the same color. He's moving them around again, trying to strike the right balance.

"I guess that's the whole point of the show. It's an expression of my place in this community as a photographer and an artist. We should think about our place in our community. What is your outlet? What is your role? What was that block? And as the block changes, as the city grows, what will it mean? Or is it just a building you see on a post card? Is it even going to be here 150 years from now?"■