

Home

Some years ago in downtown Birmingham, Alabama there was an empty building , one in a row of store fronts on a quiet side street. The building had been long abandoned, and was in such poor repair that it was unlikely to be used for any human purpose again. The red brick walls were dark with grime. The floors were stripped down to the concrete slab. The windows were not even boarded up. They gaped open like empty eye sockets of a skull, making the long dark rooms inside fair game for any drifter. I walked by every day, and got into habit of looking in each window, looking for the latest litter of bottles and fast food wrappers. Sometimes I saw a human person at the far end of the store front lying on the cement, dim and indistinct in the gloom, and I always waited a moment until I saw them move.

One day I looked in and saw a stack of broken down cardboard boxes. By broken down I mean the boxes had been neatly deconstructed into flat cardboard squares, returned from three dimensions to two, but waiting to be restored to the condition of voluminous capacity. Anyway, there was a stack of broken down boxes when I passed by. The next day they had been taped up and evidently stapled together to form a tidy cardboard house inside the long high empty storefront. The boxes from which it had been built were of different colors and sizes. They gave the neat flimsy structure a patchwork crazy-quilt appearance. The door of the hut was an opening about three feet high and wide, and the entire structure looked to be about 10 feet by 10 feet and the same dimension in height. There was plenty of head room under the high ceiling. The building must have been an impressive office or retail establishment sixty years ago. Today there was space enough for a modest cardboard house.

The house faced the open window, but back a way so that it was in the gloom, but still visible. I didn't want to seem to pry, or show undue curiosity, so I only looked for a few moments, maybe thirty seconds, then passed by.

The next day it was still there. A small open box just outside the door seemed to be functioning as a trash can. The beer bottles and paper scraps had been picked up and neatly stored away. Someone was living there.

Every day when I went by I looked to see what was happening with the little hut. A small window was cut in one of the boxes at about head height, so that I could see into the darkness inside. I thought I saw something pale float by, but it could have been my imagination. Later in the week I saw that the stacked and stapled boxes had been painted red, and I wondered why. Why bother to paint it? To protect it from the weather? I suppose so, but what weather could there be inside the building? The window had been broken out long ago, and the rain and cold had free entry to the room, but the cardboard house was far enough back not to suffer too much. And what protection would paint afford cardboard? So what was the point of the paint?

After thinking about it for a time I decided that the house had been painted to obscure the Raggedy Ann building-block air created by the varied shapes and colors of the boxes. The coat of uniform red gave the modest hut an air of dignity. It seemed less a playhouse and more a dwelling. At least that was my conclusion.

Later in the week I saw that a flower garden had been built. Small cardboard boxes were filled with dirt and placed in a line on either side of the door. Some green, weedy plants were set into each box, as if it were a clay flower pot or planter. The base of the boxes were stained with dampness; someone had watered them. I looked at them for a while, trying to figure out how the plants would ever survive in the dim atmosphere of the building. I couldn't. So I went on my way. But over the next few days I watched the plants become pale and brown, suffering from the lack of light. Then one day they were large and healthy looking again, and I understood that the dying plants had simply been replaced with new ones, taken from the empty lot next door. The bottom of the boxes were damp. The plants were still tended and watered regularly.

I'd taken to spending more time than was really polite, standing on the sidewalk looking through the window. I never heard any human conversation, or in fact any sounds that were human. Only a faint scrabbling which could have been the sound of a small animal, or for that matter a large animal lying on its side and shifting its limbs. Or a human. Once I thought I smelled bacon frying and guessed that somehow cooking equipment was in use. But it was just the aroma of the diner down the street, caught by a vagrant wind and delivered to me there in front of the cardboard house.

A few weeks went by. The house remained intact. I never saw anyone else stop and observe it, though I suppose I could not have been the only passerby to have seen it. Each day I stopped to see what new changes had been made. After a time all of the improvements seemed to have been achieved, and the house remained the same. I took to just glancing in, to assure myself that it was still there, then going about my business.

One day, about six weeks after its first appearance, the house was gone. The window was still open, but the room was bare down to the concrete floor, not even trash. Someone had swept it clean. I was tempted to call into the room, to see if there was someone there to provide an explanation, but did not. It would have somehow been wrong, though I don't know why.

The next day it was the same, and every day thereafter for a while. Then the usual litter of beer bottle and paper started to appear in the room, and I knew that the street had reclaimed it.

Sometime during the winter a real estate sign was fixed to the wall of the building, and all of the gaping windows were secured with sheets of plywood, including the window onto the cardboard room within a room.

That was some years ago, and the building is still for sale, and still sealed up tight, one of a half dozen on that street. The 'For Sale' sign is gray and faded and the building indistinguishable from others on the

street, so that today when I pass by I am no longer sure which one it was.