Artists Imagining The City: Activist art about housing- issues in chicago at the start of the twenty-first century
By Daniel Tucker

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Abstract
This text provides an overview of artists working in Chicago between 2000–2015 who responded to a lack of affordable housing or democratic control of public space.

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Before you could get grants for Placemaking, there was a short-lived movement of artists in Chicago grappling with the implications of the encroaching neo-liberalization of the city and its concomitant privatization, deregulation and marketization of spheres of life historically considered outside of market relations. These political and economic shifts came along with cultural shifts that impacted the aesthetics and feel of neighbourhoods, and artists were at the forefront of both guiding that change and being manipulated by others in the service of that change. Some
artists took this negotiation of their increasingly instrumental role in the new urban economy into their work through antagonistic and performative public art and activism. (Bedoya 2014)

The Changing City

This is change. This is change? Perplexed, I read the text ‘This is C-H-A-n-g-e’ on the advertisement above my head on the public bus in late 2004. The banner presented a portrait and a testimonial-style text by a former resident of public housing, locally administered by the Chicago
Housing Authority (commonly referred to as CHA). I had never seen an advertisement for CHA, much less a slick one with sophisticated type treatment and branding.

Cities produce and are produced by their image-myths. Think about the unending references to the gangster Al Capone, the Chicago legend that the city simply cannot live down. The skyscraper, the hogbutcher, the basketball hero, the corrupt politician, the industrial worker, and the super-predator, all form image-myths that conjure narratives about what Chicago is and, by extension, what it is not.

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The business elite of Chicago have had an ongoing project to produce imposing image-myths that
align with their values for over 100 years. Since the consolidation of resources in the Burnham Plan (1909), Development Plan for the Central Area of Chicago (1958), Chicago 21 (1973), Chicago Area Central Plan (1983), Neighborhoods Alive 21 (1999) and Chicago Metropolis 2020 (1999), the Chicago Commercial Club has concerned itself with both materially reshaping the city as well as reshaping the symbolic terrain (Holmes 2013). The local business elite's form of civic pride, tied closely with their financial investments, involves boosting the narrative that the city is a place where profit can be secured and increased. Images of towering skyscrapers and spotless malls reinforce such a narrative, while images of decaying high-rise housing projects do not. The threats to such a booster project typically reside in the marching feet and clenched fists of the poor and working classes – and occasionally with the counter image-myths initiated by artists as we will see below. With altruistic exceptions, the majority of such elite Chicago boosters have seen their less-advantaged humans as, at worst, a threat to be managed rather than a deserving recipient of redistribution. At best, the poor Chicagoans can be integrated to the extent that they are willing to reproduce the conditions for profit maximization.

Within this dynamic, the business-centred narrative of the city has been ingrained into the city-grid and political imagination of the residents. Nicknamed 'The City That Works', Chicago has
long been a place where the vast majority work for the small minority, and attempts to stray from that sense of order materially or symbolically are repressed or marginalized.
We have all lived through and been relatively unaffected by the change of a corporate logo. Kentucky Fried Chicken becomes KFC, BP goes green, Diet Coke into Coke Zero and back again, the Brawny man gets more muscles. Image management and manipulation is the subtle art behind most successful brand names. But most of us would not think about branding as it relates to agencies charged with providing social welfare.

What is the significance of a government office engaging in a re-branding campaign? It suggests
that there was an image problem, and that either a new audience is desired or that the historical audience for their logo needed to receive a new message.The CHA used to have a logo on which black and white hands were shaking in front of a high-rise building. But that image had to change as the Plan For Transformation was changing what public housing looked like. The CHA bought $600,000 of ad space in bus shelters, public transit and local Newspapers to promote CHAnge in 2005 (Bayne 2005). They brought on the Chicago-based Leo Burnett ad agency (working pro-bono) to create the look and feel of the ads. In one, a senior citizen says she feels 'just like the buildings – all brand new'. Another resident, Charles Pinkston, says in one of the other ads that 'public housing is coming to a point I hoped it would – full circle'. Maria Mendoza,

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Assistant Manager at the Bridgeport Homes, says ‘Everything is new, even my outlook’. Latoya Wolfe, who is described as a college student from the South Loop, has a full quote reading
in first person: ‘The Only Block I’m Afraid of is Writers Block’. The text turns towards third person and explains,

> *Latoya Wolfe grew up in Robert Taylor homes wanting only one thing: out. She was tired of the gangs. She put all her energy into school, determined to defy the Robert Taylor stereotype. It was determination like Latoya’s that fueled the Chicago Housing Authority to rebuild. Latoya can still remember when the first high-rise came down. She was thrilled. It was real change. She could finally see all the way down State Street, and for the first time, she felt free. Latoya’s now a student at Columbia College. She’s studying fiction writing, and at twenty-four, has already written her first novel. She plans on graduating soon, but don’t expect her to stick around. She’s got a lot more to cover.*

The recognition by CHA executives that they had an image problem is reasonable. Regardless of their logo, to the extent that they were producing an image of housing solutions for the poor and
working class, they were projecting a pretty dysfunctional image of deteriorating buildings and housing conditions as documented famously in numerous books (Kotlowitz 1992). To the extent that they were communicating housing solutions for the poor and working class, they were doing so dysfunctionally. For those Chicagoans who were residents of CHA buildings, the experience was a complicated one in which deep roots and community intermingled with stories about before and after the drugs, gangs or general dysfunctional management settled in. For Chicagoans with no direct experience living in public housing, the experience of CHA was closer to an image – seen from the highway or in passing – of urban poverty or a solution gone wrong.

The Latoya Wolfe ad depicts an experience that is grounded in reality. There are many people who lived in CHA who have long sought to get out. And there were policies that supported people who wanted to move away from public housing and into private rentals. Yet the significance of the
‘CHAnge’ rebranding campaign is not in the content of the testimonials (yes, some wanted to move, and no, not everyone wanted to move), but in the overall assertion of change. In managing their agency’s image, CHA leadership knew that they needed to write the authoritative story of what had changed and why it had changed. They needed to set the historical record in the city’s collective imagination of what public housing is and was straight – for good.

The Plan for Transformation had begun with the mandate from President Clinton that the welfare

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system in the United States as we had known it needed an overhaul. The particular experience in
Chicago had its own trajectory influenced deeply by the political culture of the Daley regime and the institutional priorities of the city's biggest corporations and universities, like the Illinois Institute of Technology and University of Chicago. Chicago's poor and working-class residents of public housing had been managed as risks (not unlike those in the commodities markets in the famous Board of Trade on LaSalle Street). The cost of management had been overtaken by the potential profit of the land upon which these residents were living, and it was time to cash in. Those high-rise images of yesterday's welfare system had to go, and were to be replaced by images of mixed-income housing managed by the private sector. CHA was no longer in the businesses of managing housing units – they had an image to manage.

City Myths

Building on a significant history of artists' projects about homelessness (Peterman 1988), the artist group Temporary Services opened their downtown office as a warming centre in a bitterly cold January winter. Advertised simply by a sandwich board placed on South State Street, passersby (homeless or housed people alike) could come into the old-fashioned office complex and ride the elevator to the eleventh floor where they would be greeted with a room full of soup, tea, reading materials and a personal masseuse, all free of charge (Temporary Services 2001). Far from solutions to homelessness, these projects all engage in a kind of image-myth creation.

Not intended to serve as large-scale solutions to homelessness, they take a problem that is often
rendered invisible and transform it into a powerful symbolic act that cries out for attention, what Chicago artist Michael Rakowitz has called 'Agitational Devices' in relationship to his own paraSITE project addressing homelessness in the city (Rich 2007). These acts spread a story of possible solutions to widespread social problems distilled into the image of hut, bus or warming centre, which have been initiated by city residents on behalf of other city residents. The more such myths circulate, the more that widespread indifference to the experience of precariousness and dispossession is called into question. Even as a solution to homelessness is desperately needed, the concern these projects have with image-making offers significant lessons for those engaged in working for more conventional and long-lasting policy solutions to urban inequality.

Nestled beside Lake Shore Drive and overlooking Lake Michigan, a small undeveloped patch of grass and wildflowers stood out as an exception to a city projecting an image of profit maximization. What could be the significance of such a valuable piece of land, laying fallow, amidst towering hotels and high-end shopping? After examination of the land for many months, the artist Laurie Palmer set out to create 'Three Acres On The Lake: The DuSable Park Project' (named for the site's proximity to the location of Chicago first settler Jean Baptise DuSable's

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trading post), a social experiment to draw attention to the site lasting from 2000 to 2003. Palmer spent these years organizing a series of events at which Chicagoans were invited to work up proposals for their ideal uses of that land. Unsurprisingly, these proposals strayed far beyond typical commercial zoning uses and challenged the conventions of what would constitute a 'park'. Esther Parada proposed a garden called 'Remember The Ladies', which celebrated the history of a women-led organization that began in the late 1920s to memorialize the site where the first non-native settler of Chicago, Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable, started his homestead. Rather than a monument to these women, Parada proposed they each be memori- alized by a tree. Anna Mayer proposed that 'DuSable Park should be designated as federally managed wilderness' and the art education organization Stockyard Institute worked with teenagers to imagine 'Dusable Life House', which would house people without a support system (Palmer 2005).

One occasion at which the proposals for the DuSable Park Project were presented was a weekend-long 'campaign to reclaim all the space, land and visual culture of the City of Chicago back for the residents who live, work and play here every day'. The event, dubbed Department of Space and Land Reclamation (DSLR) to mimic the prevalent role of city government bureaucracies and agencies in managing what can or cannot happen in the city, involved over 100 people doing creative 'space reclamations' throughout Chicago (DSLR 2007). Palmer used the event as an opportunity to present some of the proposals and solicit more. Both her long-term project and the DSLR campaign are examples of grassroots urban planning that demonstrate many Chicagoans' desire to contest the management of space and resources by the Commercial Club and their allies in city government. This approach to initiating calls for participation that anyone can submit to mirrors the official practices of Requests For Proposals (RFPs) that City, State or Federal Government might initiate, but by lowering the barrier to entry to something ephemeral and playful – this work interrogates the quality and depth of that participation.

Never A City So Real

This is the true story … of seven strangers … picked to live in a house … work together and have
their lives taped … to find out what happens … when people stop being polite … and start getting
real …. It always starts like that. Since the early 1990s two generations of young adults have come of age watching The Real World (2002) on their TVs (and now re-runs on their tablets and laptops). Every season new host cities and thousands of 20-somethings compete to participate. The series pioneered the genre of reality TV while projecting an image of youth culture and urban scenes for the teens of suburbia to salivate over and aspire towards. In the early seasons of the show, you could not get more edgy or diverse or relevant on TV: young ad executives,

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proto-dot com business people, HIV-positive activists mingling with nihilistic bike punks, Christian cowboys, and socially conscious hip hop artists. The host city itself became a central character. As the cast of Realworlders explored and made their way, so did the audience, discovering the neighbourhoods and subcultures that cities have on offer.

It took nearly a decade for the show producers to settle on Chicago as an urban scene worthy of their camera frames. In the summer of 2001, Real World Chicago set up production in a Wicker Park building that had housed a popular cafe throughout the 1990s frequented by the likes of Liz Phair and the Smashing Pumpkins. The ‘Dream of the 90s’ that the skit-comedy show Portlandia (2011) ironically celebrates is largely based on Chicago in the 1990s as experienced by co-creator Fred Armisen during his days as a Wicker Park scene-dweller. As many residents at the time commented, the arrival of the Real World to the neighbourhood was a firm confirmation that the dream was over for good. In Portlandia fashion, the declaration that a place ‘is over’ has become predictably a part of hipster parlance. In the eyes of ‘creative class’ consulting guru Richard Florida, this is the moment when the cool neighbourhood trade-off of devalued property warehoused by landlords but spruced up by pioneering artists can be cashed in (Lloyd 2010).
Wicker Park’s transition and the Real World taping happened to coincide with the anger experienced by priced-out creatives, the energy released by the Department of Space and Land Reclamation campaign, and inspiration drawn from protests in Seattle, Washington, DC and Quebec City, where students banned together with farmers and teamsters to articulate a critique of corporate globalization. This confluence of visceral, local and global events with media spectacle could not have been anticipated by the television producers or the local politicians luring them with tax credits and zoning permissions. What happened was something between a siege, a protest, a stunt and a joke.

All afternoon, handbills circulated in the neighbourhood’s bars and cafes advertising a ‘party at the Real World’. News of the taping had been kept secret for a long time, but as the production began and it was becoming commonplace for camera crews to disrupt workplaces, picnics and sidewalk conversations, people were starting to become more curious and slightly annoyed by the simultaneous exploitation of the neighbourhood’s image and disengagement with actual residents. Upon arriving at the ‘party’ it quickly became apparent that the party was not inside but actually taking place in the street outside (MacPhee, 2007).

‘“I am not an actor in my neighborhood’, one partier chalked on the sidewalk as the crowd massed. Private security officers came outside and made it clear there was no party and guests were not to be allowed inside. The fliers were a hoax created by a cadre of artists and activists bent on exploiting the hype around the show to stage an event of their own. Red paint splattered on the door of the Real World loft; the crowd numbered over 100 and took over the street on both sides. Long-time resident and Lumpen magazine publisher Ed Marszewski took hold of a

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megaphone and shouted, ‘We have three demands – Stop taping immediately and leave town, you can take the Blue Line or the Orange Line. Give us your production equipment so we can do something “real”’ with it. And “FREE THE REAL WORLD SEVEN”’ (YouTube 2013).

With that turn of phrase, the ‘seven strangers picked to live in a loft’ had become the subjects of a convoluted liberation struggle. What started as a party had turned to a protest, staged partly for the news cameras that quickly arrived as protesters intensified and arrests began, partly for the cameras filming inside the house with hopes of disrupting the seamless production, and partly
for the pure pleasure of having an excuse to take to the street to blow off steam. Something as impersonal as television and as personal (and private) as getting priced out of your apartment had
become something worthy of bringing together into a street party.

‘We were making a stink about the fact that a multi-billion dollar corporation is turning everyone’s lives into an advertisement for real estate and supposed urban renewal in Chicago’, explained one protester, Nato Thompson (also an organizer of DSLR), in an interview with Tamron Hall (then of Fox Chicago News). Later in that news segment Salem Collo-Julin, then a member of the group Temporary Services, modified the demands earlier articulated by Marszewski, asserting that the building being used for taping should be converted to affordable housing (YouTube 2013).

This narrative of discontent was edited out of the televised version of the show, with the only exception being a few glimpses of the paint-splattered door before it could be painted over. While
the door remained unexplained, the message was clear to the show’s producers. Chicago’s ‘unwelcome party’ conveyed that, despite the enticing gestures coming from City Hall, the residents were not content to be the subjects of reality TV. They wanted to be the subjects of their own real lives, to assert their power and project a different image of the city than one in which the creative class’s only role was to pave the way for emerging markets.

There Goes The Neighbourhood

The primary tasks of real estate developers are to imagine and to manage. Through those tasks, they bring together the material base of land with a whole range of immaterial activities that perfectly characterize the intangibility of a service-based economy. Plans are made, foundations are poured, signs are posted, lawyers are consulted, paperwork is exchanged, tenants are enticed, loans are obtained, spaces are filled.

In the summer of 2001, an imaginative act of real estate mismanagement appeared on a street just south-west of ‘the Loop’, Chicago’s Central Business District, in the Pilsen neighbourhood.

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Long established as an immigrant port of entry, the Pilsen area had been home to generations of
working-class activists and artists. In the 2010 census the area was 82 per cent Latino, with an increasing white population (8 per cent in 2000; 12 per cent in 2010). One family had been buying
property since they moved to the area in 1914, and in 1987 the third generation of the Podmajersky family began to market the family's housing portfolio towards art-centric development. Although not explicitly marketed to white newcomers, rent levels were set significantly higher than typical of the local market and thereby primarily attracted new residents to the area (Grams 2010).Michael Thomas, the founder of Dogmatic Gallery in East Pilsen, reflects on his experiences moving into the area in 1996:

> *Pilsen was just Pilsen when we moved moved into [1822 N Desplaines]. It was a largely first or second generation Mexican, with single family home owners. The local bar sold beer by the bottles. The Halsted bus used to run 24/7 until '98 or '99 which was nice. Grocery stores were in short supply then, but bodegas were everywhere. Along with, hardware stores, and barbershops, it was a little biome really. Initially there had been some small theatres but not much in the way of galleries. There was an annual open studio walk. [The gallery and artist collective] Polvo opened about the same time we did. Overall it just seemed more of a cafe culture centering around the [cafe] Jumping Bean. With photos or paintings constantly shifting on the walls, and lots of fliers for poetry slams and Mexican hardcore bands taped to the windows, it was the nucleus of what was construed to be neighborhood chic. The galleries seemed to come after 2000.* (Gunn 2009)

It was difficult to piece the whole thing together. First an ad was placed in the classified section of the Chicago Reader. Soon after, fliers circulated in the neighbourhood and a small billboard was hung in front of the small two-story property. Week after week for a month there were open houses at which visitors could come in and tour the first floor of the building in the eastern part of Pilsen. Every week the fliers and the billboard would increase the variety of amenities and number of units in the building. Finally, the sign read ACT NOW! GOING FAST! SOLD! SOLD! ONLY 23 UNITS LEFT! and advertised

> *Around the clock security 24-7, surveillance camera at all entrances at all times, a guard, smart kitchen, lead free hepa-filtered central ventilation heat/AC, 24x swiss super-flo shower massagers 25 gallon per min flow- thru, 3 gigabyte ethernet, 20 terrabyte on-location building exclusive server, reserved on-street parking with valet and weekend detailing service.*

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The property was being marketed by an entity calling itself Pioneer Renewal Trust, whose tagline
was ‘Staking your claim in the Urban Frontier’.

Finally, at the fourth open house was one last hurrah at which cinder- block walls were partially built inside units, subdividing the already tiny space into even more units that felt more like an indoor labyrinth than a condo. Two young ‘agents’ representing Pioneer Renewal Trust greeted you at the door where you could browse a tongue-in-cheek website asking ‘What Is Gentrification?’, and then the hoax was revealed. The building was 1822 S. Desplaines. It was Dogmatic Gallery.

Angry potential home-buyers stood on the stoop of the building while the organizers staged the event. It was to be an ‘anti-gentrification forum’. The organizers, a group of artists (Dave Grant, Josh MacPhee, Laurie Jo Reynolds, Ben Rubin, Trevor Paglen, Paul Sargent and Nato Thompson), had put the art gallery up for sale in an attempt to lure ‘greedy developers’ who were interested in buying up properties in the area. The hope was that they could use the language and aesthetics of real estate to confront the people they perceived to be producing the problem. Instead they attracted low and middle-income first-time home buyers who thought that the asking price sounded reasonable. The artists had made a crucial mistake. They did not understand the real estate market adequately to know what asking prices and what advertising outlets would attract the developers and speculators.

A few years later, just down the street, signs started appearing over-night announcing a new royal family’s jurisdiction. The ironic project aimed to declare the entire neighbourhood to be a new territory, the Principality of Podmajersky, as if the consolidation of so much property under one family must be rooted in some kind of contemporary aristocratic aggrandizement. Using their own street signage, stickers and flyers, the group launched a mapping of the properties in the neighbourhood owned by the Podmajersky company, nicknamed ‘Pods’, which are typically recognizable because of their uniform address signage on doorways and above mailboxes. The materials produced also gathered information about researching land ownership. Their website and materials read:

It is the dark ages. Warlords, gangster capitalists and landed persons fight for control of property, products and people. The centers of culture have fallen and artisans, workers and producers of knowledge scram- ble to find fiefdoms and courts in which to find shelter and protection. In the midst of a crumbling empire many landholders jostle for power. In the ancient land of Pilsen, while workers plow the fields, a family has taken in many lost minstrels and artisans. Through invasion and fortification a new land has taken root and is conquering territories throughout the realm, collecting dues and administrating their particular blend of manorial system. This new territory is called The Principality of Podmajersky.(Pop 2004)

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This intervention, in 2004, occurred in the context of a new media arts festival called VersionFest
organized by Lumpen magazine among others, initiated by a group calling themselves Ultramar Baymount who had decided they had had enough of the one-family rule. The signs were quickly taken down, but for several weeks the project's website hosted a lively debate about real estate development and gentrification in the neighbourhood.

In the vicinity, other artists were waging their critiques of gentrification using more conventional exhibitions. On an early spring evening in 2004, crammed in a second-story apartment entered into right on 18th street, nearly 100 people shuffled their way through the hallways and bedrooms of what was then known as Polvo (or 'dust', in English) to see the art collective's new curatorial effort. 'Tu Casa Es Mi Casa: Artists Response to Gentrification' brought together over a dozen artists involved in the network that Polvo founders Miguel Cortez, Jesus
Macarena-Avila and Elvia Rodriguez-Ochoa have been cultivating since the mid-1990s. Maintained by long-time residents of the area, Polvo served as an intersection point of the various art communities that could be found in Pilsen. While many of their exhibitions took on a political
theme, this show addressed conflicts especially close to home. Miguel Cortez's contribution to the exhibition involved mass producing a sticker with the face of 25th Ward Alderman Danny
Solis that read 'Pilsen for Sale'. Another strong contribution, 'A Game of Economic Segregation by
the Bourgeois Brothers', involved a revised Monopoly-like board game made by Kimberly Viviano that took the players through the many stages of gentrification (Weber 2014).

Not long after this in the summer of 2004 a curious neighbourhood protest was taking place on the opposite side of town, in Uptown on the north lakefront. Someone in a beret was holding a handwritten sign that read vertically, with a new line for every capitalized letter, 'Artists Seeking Solutions to Housing by Ousting Low-income people from Everywhere!', spelling out the
acronym ASSHOLE. The protest was organized by Artists Against Artist Housing, an ad hoc group that was formed solely for this event. After a multi-year struggle by affordable housing advocates to maximize the number of affordable housing units in a large new development on a former train yard site, conservative homeowners in the area threw a wrench in the process by proposing that affordable housing be used to subsidize artists instead of the general neighbourhood population. As protestor Laurie Palmer (also the initiator of the Three Acres on the Lake project) explains,

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> *In 2004 the share of the Wilson Yard TIF property reserved for affordable housing dwindled to a small piece of what the [COURAJ activist] organization had been fighting for. However, affordable housing still retained a foothold in the plan, and so the organized gentrifiers [the Uptown Neighborhood Council - ed] introduced yet another twist. They decided to push for the idea that the affordable housing quota still remaining in the development plan be for artists housing because, they argued, artists too need subsidized space. It was a pathetic attempt to use artists – those supposedly classless value-adders – to augment their property values. Three of us donned berets and protested their rally. What I don't have is a picture of the sea of orange-shirted pro-artist housing people, about 30 of them, with identical bright orange t-shirts – which would have made a much more compelling image. (Palmer 2007)*

This kind of creative activism may be perceived as anti-development in a general sense. More accurately, it is anti-developer. Each of these actions, while small in scope and scale, sought to tease out a tension that has become fundamental to the urban artist's identity. That is, what is my
role in the neighbourhood? As all social relations in the United States, and specifically property, are racialized and inflected by histories of white supremacy, white artists are continuously blamed
for their role in gentrification, yet often find themselves in precarious housing situations after short periods of transition. While some artists opt to capitalize on neighbourhood change by speculating on property values themselves, many others feel guilty or privately complain about a range of issues relating to loss of authenticity to affordability and safety, as if their role is somehow outside of such dynamics. Neither the speculative nor the apolitical approach benefits society if they do not interrogate the forces at work in large-scale neighbourhood transformation –
namely, financial institutions, government and developers. Such forces far outweigh the effects of
individual artists, yet most debates about gentrification fall flat because the parties rely more on pointing fingers at other relatively powerless individuals rather than looking for the entities capable of large-scale infra- structural reorganization and profit extraction.

From Antagonism To Placemaking

'Are Tourists More Important Than The Poor?' asks a poster of Mayor Richard M. Daley's face installed in a privately managed bus shelter just steps from the doors of City Hall. The poster reads, 'This Is CHAos', otherwise aesthetically indistinguishable from the 'This is CHAnge' public relations campaign. Installed on CTA trains, throughout the Loop business district and particular public housing redevelopment areas such as Cabrini Green and Ida B. Wells homes,

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the CHAos poster featuring Mayor Daley was one of five such graphic appropriations pointing a finger at ‘power-brokers’ from the public and private sector who stood to gain political or financial capital in the transformation of the CHA.

While only on view for a few hours on the morning of 27 May 2005 before they were removed, the CHAos counter-campaign got under the skin of the CHA leadership and their allies and extensive news coverage in numerous local and international news outlets and websites (Nagy 2009). The ongoing presence of the chicagohousingauthority.net website, which was designed to mimic the design used on the CHA’s official thecha.org website at the time, prompted the CHA to try numerous times to shut down the website with cease and desist letters. The letters were to no avail, as the website was registered through a front group entitled Housing is a Human Right c/o Online Policy Group.

The potency of the CHAos campaign rested in its counter-narrative to the meaning of ‘change’ as it was defined by the CHA. CHAos suggested that change was not neutral or necessarily positive, that there was conflict over its definition. This kind of action could not, and was not intended to, save public housing from being torn down. The battle in this case was rhetorical. When a city department attempts to neutralize the complex history of state welfare into a rebranding effort, they are fighting over the image-myth of the city. CHAos and other antagonistic approaches to art-activism about housing issues confront us with the question of culprits: who is to blame? To talk of ‘gentrification’ is to invoke an ambiguously abstracted perpetrator of economic and cultural change, the ‘invisible hand’ of the last 30 years of urban life. But fundamentally, underlying the blame and guilt game of gentrification is the urgent question of who is allowed to live, and express themselves beyond mere survival, in the cities they have passionately toiled to create?

Moving beyond antagonism towards solutions, some artists have recently taken on the project of
affordable housing more directly. Theaster Gates and the Rebuild Foundation have recently initiated the Dorchester Artist Housing Collaborative (DAHC) on East 70th street, in the Grand Crossing Neighborhood, where Gates has been living and developing a number of site- specific projects for nearly a decade. His most ambitious effort to date, DAHC, is a redevelopment of a former housing project into 32 new units that will house practising artists alongside ‘arts interested’ public housing residents. Four former townhomes were converted into a neighbourhood art centre at the centre of the block-and-a-half-wide complex.

DAHC is a collaboration with Chicago Housing Authority and Brinshore Development. The firm of

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Landon Bone Baker Architects, which is also at work on the Chicago Public Housing Museum, was brought on as designers for the project that opened to the public in the fall of 2014. In conjunction with the planning of DAHC, the Bruner Loeb Forum, housed at Harvard University, brought their 2012 'convening' to the University of Chicago with a special focus on the work of Gates and the Rebuild Foundation under the banner focused on 'Artist-Led and Culture-Initiated Redevelopment'. In a 53-page report on the possibilities and challenges of opening an art centre at DAHC, there were concerns expressed by neighbourhood residents about the proposed mixed-income rental units for artists and their possible contribution to local gentrification (MBMD 2013). These concerns were perhaps accentuated by Gates' day-job with the University of Chicago Center for Arts and Public Life, at which he is charged with using art to reach out to neighbourhoods near the university that have typically been excluded from participation in campus life. The ambiguity of which 'hat' the lead organizer wears was cited in the report. While this initiative conflicts with the stance taken by Artists Against Artist Housing, the position Gates holds is mandated to direct development rather than resist it, possibly a reflection of his train- ing as an urban planner and former job at the city's transportation authority (Austen 2013). But as Gates explained in a recent interview, his approach is far from conventional:

> *… If I were an entrepreneur opening a cafe, I would definitely do that differently. If I had the mantra of developer over my head, it would imply certain things about a return investment. Instead I just said to myself, 'There are no venues in my neighborhood for listening to live music'.*(Chen and Gates 2013)

In another interview a few months later, Gates asserts that 'I've never imag- ined myself as an activist. The work that I'm doing with neighborhoods is work we should all be doing' (Yablonsky 2013).This kind of urban economic development coupled with benevolent social commitments is expressed in the business world's embrace of the 'triple bottom line' of economic, environmental and social concerns as well as the urban-planning trend of 'placemaking'. In fact, the Bruner Loeb Forum focusing on the work of Theaster Gates and Rebuild Foundation was titled 'The Art of Placemaking', a term that has also found its way into the ongoing framing of these practices. Gates also employs the concept of utopia, an impulse found throughout the history of artists trying
to push the boundaries of art into life for the last 150 years. This merging of the utopian and the entrepreneurial can be disorienting. In a recent lecture addressed to artists, urban theorist Neil Brenner posed a challenge to the premise of 'placemaking', warning that the 'discourse of creativity is the new urban ideology [… and …] culture is being instrumentalized towards neo-liberalism'. His provocations concluded with a suggestion that urban cultural producers should
examine and assert their 'core political values' over place-based rhetoric, as a way to avoid becoming enclaves or isolated islands easy to destroy or co-opt (Brenner 2013).

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The actions, events and conflicts I have described are a sampling of ways that artists have playfully, critically and constructively grappled with life, and specifically housing, throughout the neo-liberalization of Chicago. Moving beyond the narrow confines of the 'creative class', these
artists avoid instrumentalization and assert their utopian and resistant practices, which range from taking on the Chicago Housing Authority to partnering with the Chicago Housing Authority. This kind of fervent experimentation is needed now more than ever. Artists can provide direction for activists and policy-makers instead of merely being tools for cynical development agendas. In a time and place where the experience of land/use is abstractly mediated through tenancy, welfare, ownership, mortgages and finance, there is a role for practices of mediation that reveal the complicated social experiences of land/use more sensuously and creatively – creating new image-myths of what the city might become.

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*This was not the first time the Monopoly concept had been applied to gentrification in the Pilsen neighbourhood. In the mid-1990s John Pittman Weber and Gamaliel Ramirez with the Chicago Public Art Group produced a mural about development using Monopoly-inspired images.

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