The Neoliberal City

Autonomous Cultural Practices in Chicago From 2000-2005
As the territorial boundaries of the international ‘ownership society’ expand, we witness our last public square being wired for surveillance and renamed after a corporation. With this sweeping expansion, we (the editors) feel an urgent need to reclaim, rebuild, and redefine public space as not only an essential component of democratic participation, but also as an open field for play, hope, and critical reinvention.

Towards the ends of that reinvention, this publication will take a look at a unique period of cultural activism that took place in Chicago from 2000 to 2005. At that time a wide range of activists, artists and hybrid coalitions responded to the spatial shifts in power created by neoliberal economic restructuring. Using a diverse range of methodologies, as you will see, these groups and projects address some of the most fundamental and urgent challenges of contemporary urban life.

The term ‘neoliberalism’ refers to the historical transformation and recent extension of capitalist market domination into every corner of the globe and into every moment of our waking lives. Its dominating logic of free-market fundamentalism corrodes social solidarity as it rejects social justice in favor of individual ‘freedom’ to compete and consume.

Neoliberal policies of corporate governmentality, structural adjustment, privatization, financialization, and deregulation of labor and markets have amounted to a complete dismantling of the Keynesian welfare state (public spending to stimulate the economy) as well as an erosion of the democratic protections and political gains fought for by hundreds of years of peoples’ struggle. The practical effects of this global policy of accumulation through dispossession have been the rapid, and geographically uneven distribution of poverty and structural inequality.

In the US, the dissolution of most aspects of the social state (such as public education and public housing) are concomitant with the development of a massive market for, and public financing of, the prison and military. In Chicago this has meant the imposition of new surveillance and policing infrastructures in increasingly disenfranchised and abandoned low-income neighborhoods at the edges of the city.
while the majority of transportation renovations, new libraries, parks and capital investments have been centralized in the ever-expanding core of downtown gentrification.

While the increasingly speculative nature of real estate has made the pattern of gentrification a dominant one in every city, Chicago has experienced particularly violent waves of residential regeneration. Public spaces and social institutions for the provision of common needs such as food, shelter, and education have been thrown into the private market, forcing Chicago’s residents to become citizen-entrepreneurs; competing with each other for extremely scarce employment opportunities and public resources.

The projects in this publication raise fundamental questions about our right to the city and the possible uses of culture in the struggle for community self-determination: How should we interact with our neighbors? What kinds of reforms do we want from the state and what kinds of collective infrastructures should we be building ourselves instead? What kinds of spaces encourage resistance, free movement, and the well being of the whole population? What would it take to denormalize capitalism in the ‘global’ city of Chicago?

Much of the work presented here reflects temporary organizations and events. In cases where it was possible, the projects and groups are described by their participants or initiators and are accompanied by press releases and promotional ephemera that were used at the time of the project’s initiation. The first section of this publication, “Right to the City”, looks at contestations of the planning of housing and land use in the city. Projects that respond to the gentrification of various neighborhoods will be shared alongside campaigns that critique tourist-centric economic development plans, and the corresponding privatization of public housing and public space.

In the other sections “Protest Experiments” and “Social Reorganization” we will look at self-organized attempts to create alternative public spheres through the reinvention of protest and the creation of other spaces for democratic convergence. The presentation of independent media projects alongside space reclamations and interventions offer examples of exciting ways of democratically sharing ideas and writing alternative histories while resisting the consolidation of media, communication, and social life under the control of fewer and fewer corporations. These alternative models of resource sharing and cooperation counter the hyperindividualism and competition that has taken hold of our minds, and instead build coalitions and creative communities of resistance that are building the capacity for a radical and imaginative new course.
The Right to the City: 
Gentrification and the Struggle for Urban Space

What is gentrification? Who does gentrification impact? How is it perpetuated? Is it inevitable or "natural"? What are the alternatives? And how are these alternatives most effectively demanded, implemented and maintained? These questions have and continue to animate activist responses to loss of affordable housing, to displacement, and how this gentrification privileges some values while displacing others through the cultural and economic reorganization of existing classes, groups and resources in urban environments.

Since the 1970s, great economic reorganization has occurred in cities and brought about a tremendous growth of the real-estate market - resulting in the tendency of speculation that provides anyone with the means to invest, a potential entrepreneurial role in the urban housing market. "Blighted" neighborhoods previously ignored, working class enclaves formerly centered around factory work, pockets of affordability near transportation or other amenities - residents and small businesses in these contexts are all increasingly victims of a rabid real estate market that is not accountable to residents.

In keeping with capitalism’s tendency to overdevelop certain contexts while underdeveloping others, the contemporary phase of neoliberal policies provides refined tools to the owning class for greater accumulation in the urban context. The expansion of urban markets and “urban regeneration” practices have brought enormous investment to areas that have been neglected for decades, at the same time, local governments often fail to provide adequate support for existing communities, compounding their vulnerability to displacement.

The particulars of development practices that lead to significant displacement can take many forms. Rent-gap speculation allows property to devalue with significant disparities between potential and actual rent collected. This leaves properties to be bought inexpensively and re-sold for immense profits. Other strategies include the more aggressive tear-down style build-it-and-they-will-come development. There are also the government sponsored interventions that sell previously public land at subsidized rates. Each of these examples achieve similar spatial-economic reorganization through the private market without securing benefits for residents or holding developers accountable: displacing the most precarious members of the neighborhood first, attacking the integrity and viability of neighborhood institutions through rising property values and land taxes, and eventually converting the existing infrastructure to cater the needs and values of new residents.

In an attempt to address the complexity of life in an increasingly privatized and unaccountable landscape - with deregulated free markets having more direct impact on social welfare than the state- the following projects have dissected some of the most challenging questions of contemporary city life. They take on the real estate development corporations, the cultural/lifestyle marketing industries, the public relations firms, the ‘public-private partnerships’ and the politicians who greedily exploit the human need for housing. These projects show, through creative and cultural intervention, what possibilities exist for exposing the actors, schemes, and agendas most significantly impacting affordable housing and neighborhood integrity - two of the most basic requirements for social reorganization and self determination.

Though significant shifts in power (and specifically in policy) will be required for most people to obtain a right to housing, these practices can begin to influence shifts in culture and information necessary to better understand where we are at and where we want to go.
Whose City Is It Anyways?
by Pauline Lipman

The new world order is coming to roost in Chicago with a vengeance.

Increasingly the city is defined by neoliberalism, the global policies of transnational capital that make the market and individual self-interest primary in every sphere of economic and social life. On every side we see the elimination of the public interest and public control, from privatization (and corporatization) of parks (Millenium Park), schools (Renaissance 2010, the current reform master plan for public education in Chicago), and bus shelters to the elimination of public housing. Corporate and finance capital in collaboration with the Daley administration are reconstructing the city to serve their interests. Their agenda grows out of changing relations between cities and the global economy and the emergence of gentrification as a pivotal force in urban economies.

In the new global economy, major cities compete directly for investment, corporate headquarters, international tourism, and business services. This competition drives cities like Chicago to engage in aggressive marketing of urban space. The city’s ubiquitous new boulevards and wrought iron fences, its lakeshore remake, and now Millennium Park exemplify this strategy. It also drives them to provide the most favorable business climate (tax cuts, investment opportunities, and well-trained low-wage service and production workers) as well as an environment that can attract high paid professionals (a few elite public schools, upscale neighborhoods). In this context, low-income people of color, particularly African Americans, must be policed, contained, and demonized to justify their displacement and exclusion.

Gentrification is key to remaking the city. Urban sociologists argue gentrification has become a pivotal sector in the new neoliberal urban economies as developers transform whole city landscapes into “gentrification complexes” of consumption, recreation, culture, and public space. You only have to look at University Village or River North to see that this is true. This is facilitated by city government through Tax Increment Financing Zones (TIFs), new transportation routes (the proposed “Circle Line”), the elimination of public housing to open up land for development, aesthetic infrastructure improvements at tax payer expense (all those boulevards and “street scapes”), and the criminalization of low-income people of color and the policing of all populations deemed “undesirable.”

The conquest of the city as a space of middle class stability and whiteness is both actual and rhetorical. A key feature of neoliberalism is reframing the public conversation about the city—who has a right to live there, what constitutes a “good” neighborhood, and what kinds of economic development are possible. Privatization, gentrification, deindustrialization, and higher costs for public services are presented as inevitable, the only possible solution. The class nature and the racism of this process are hidden in the language of “mixed income communities” and “regeneration”—or in Chicago’s case “renaissance” and “transformation”. We live in a city that spent $1/2 billion for Millennium Park; regularly gives tax breaks to and funds massive infrastructure improvements for developers; tore down 19,000 units of public housing to open up space for development, displacing whole working class communities for condos; and a city that polices those who transgress the city image. Chicago is a city whose officials raise fares on public transportation, fail to educate students and then use that failure as a reason to privatize schools, and that criminalizes whole sectors of African American communities. How do they get away with this? In part, they have created a new common sense. The only way the city can “move forward” is through their agenda.

What we need is a direct challenge to the practice and discourse of hijacking the city for private gain - a challenge from the ground. The practices here offer fresh approaches to collective organizing against the neoliberal city, and accounts of public interventions that reframe the discussion about the city. What we need are actions that blend art and activism to create discussion, to force open a new conversation, to define reality from the point of view of those on the bottom. We need an exciting new energy that challenges who will live in the city, who will benefit from its growth and development, and who will get to participate in fundamental decisions affecting economic, cultural, and social life. What we need is a space to contest whose city Chicago will be.

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Pioneer Renewal Trust

In the fall of 2001, a group of artists were invited to create a project at Dogmatic, a gallery in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of East Pilsen. In order to address the intense speculation in the neighborhood by developers, the invited group decided to pose as a real estate development company, Pioneer Renewal Trust, and put the building that housed the gallery up for sale. The objective was to lure developers into a dialogue and confront them using their own language and double speak. The house was listed in local newspaper classifieds and development signs were placed on the front of the building. The seemingly earnest signs were changed every week to reflect the continued expansion of the real estate charade, becoming increasingly absurd as the project wore on. Three open houses were also held, during which the artists performed the roles of developer/salesperson while also attempting to convey their real critique of the gentrification process. The project concluded with Pioneer Renewal Trust coming clean at an outdoor public forum held in the street in front of Dogmatic. The forum discussed gentrification, current and historical resistance to the process, and the limitations of their faux company tactic, which had succeeded more in hoaxing young people in search of affordable housing that the greedy developers who were the intended target.
MEDIA ALERT:
Just about everyone in Chicago remembers the beautiful life. Single family residences curled up next to spacious throughfares, with neighbors who said “Hello”. A community of diversity, with transportation and bustling business districts nearby. Acclaimed schools and gorgeous parks...is it the Chicago of yesteryear?

Daley Village is not just a new development. Named after one of the most notable leaders of our fair city, Daley Village is positioned to be one of the most unique living experiences available, at affordable prices for all.

Spacious single and multi-family residences with spectacular city views will offer a haven from the city chill. The homes, designed by top-notch architects famous for their attention to artistic details, all feature newly built walls and customized exterior decoration. Ample parking is also available.

WHAT: Groundbreaking ceremony for Daley Village, the newest housing initiative for low income families

WHY: Low income families need dramatically new and different housing opportunities. This initiative reflects the City of Chicago’s dedication to the shelter of its citizens.

WHERE: The first Daley Village test site, at 920 N. Elston Ave., two blocks north of the intersection of Elston and Milwaukee Avenues.

WHEN: 10:00 a.m., Monday, December 3, 2001

WHO: Daley Village is a collective effort of the City of Chicago, the Pioneer Renewal Trust development group and Housing Illinois, an organization dedicated to exploring affordable housing options for all in the Land of Lincoln.
**Principality of Podmajersky**

*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 scramble 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.*

- from www.lumpen.com/pop

The Podmajersky family for the last 2 generations has catered to artist communities in search of affordable housing. The current John Podmajersky III has taken to the speculative model of development practices and incorporated the artist community into a sophisticated neighborhood-branding effort. He has named this initiative "The Chicago Arts District" referencing the live/work spaces which he has converted from commercially zoned storefronts and small factories on the main stretches of the neighborhood. The housing stock caters to artists who needed flexible spaces to produce objects within and for a time, cheap rents made these houses, an attractive offer for primarily young and white cultural producers to temporarily occupy.

In the context of a new media arts festival called VersionFest in 2004, a group calling themselves Ultramar Baymount decided to take an analysis of these neighborhood dynamics to the streets in a project called Principality of Podmajersky. Using their own street signage, stickers and flyers the group launched a mapping of the properties in the neighborhood owned by the Podmajersky company, nicknamed "Pod's", which are typically recognizable because of their uniform address signage on doorways and above mailboxes. The tongue-in-cheek project aimed to declare the entire neighborhood to be a new territory Principality of Podmajersky, as if the consolidation of so much property under one family must be rooted in some kind of contemporary aristocratic form of land use. The materials produced also gathered information about researching land ownership.

On the project’s website a lively debate emerged about real estate development and gentrification in the neighborhood.
Artists Against Artist Housing
by Laurie Palmer

For much of the 20th century Uptown was an exceptionally diverse community ethnically and economically, an entry point for immigrants from all over the world—Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, with different waves arriving at different times. Many stayed in Uptown where already established immigrant communities as well as social services and affordable housing options made it possible to live in the city on low and moderate incomes. With a strong gentrifying push moving up the lakefront in the late 90s and supported by City Hall’s plan to develop the Broadway corridor, many of these residents were pushed out.

The lack of affordable rental units was exacerbated by deliberate campaigns by the new gentrifiers to criminalize long-term residents and to rid the neighborhood of social services. In this context a long-running neighborhood activist group with origins in the sixties and seventies re-created itself under the name COURAJ (Community of Uptown Residents for Affordability and Justice) and began to try to intercept this deliberate process. One of COURAJ’s main goals was to secure 200 units of low-cost housing in the new Tax Increment Financing or “TIF” development project called the Wilson Yards at Montrose and Broadway. Starting around 1998 there were many years of charrettes, referendums, rallies, marches, meetings, and trips to city hall to positively affect these planning decisions and to try to help stabilize the existing community.

In 2004 COURAJ saw the share of the Wilson Yard TIF property reserved for affordable housing dwindle to a small piece of what the organization had been fighting for. However, affordable housing still retained a foothold in the plan, and so the organized gentrifiers introduced yet another twist. They decided to push for the idea that the affordable housing quotient 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 class-less 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.

(1) For more information on TIF see the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group www.ncbg.org

Anti-Displacement and Poor Peoples Groups Listing

Chicago:
Pilsen Alliance (Pilsen) pilsenalliance.org
STOP/Student Tenant Organizing Project (Woodlawn) stopgentrification@gmail.com
Humboldt Park Participatory Democracy Project prcc-chgo.org
Metropolitan Tenants Organization tenants-rights.org
Coalition to Project Public Housing limits.com/cpph
Blocks Together (West Humboldt) 773-276-2194 blockstogether.org
Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCHO) (Mid South Side) 773-548-7500
Organization of the Northeast (Northside) onechicago.org
Logan Square Neighborhood Association lsn.org
Balanced Development Coalition 312-759-8269
Chicago Coalition for the Homeless chicagohomeless.org
West Humboldt Park Community Dev. Council whpdevelopmentcouncil.org
Near West Side Community Dev. Corporation nearwestsidedcc.org
West Town Leadership United 773-394-7484
Poor People’s Millenium Movement beauty@wethepeoplemedia.org
Neighborhood Capital Budget Group ncbg.org
RPCAN (Rogers Park) www.rpcan.org
COURAJ (Uptown) 4554 N. Broadway #236 60640
Brighton Park Neighborhood Council bpnc-chicago.org
Lugenia Burns Hope Center (Bronzeville) 3424 S. State Street, #324 60616
Bickerdike Redevelopment Corp. bickerdike.org
The Resurrection Project (Little Village, Pilsen) resurrectionproject.org
SouthWest Youth Collaborative swyc.org

National:
Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (LA) juicy.net
Miami Workers Center miamiworkerscenter.org
Kensington Welfare Rights (Philly) kwru.org
Poor Peoples Economic Human Rights economichumanrights.org
SF Community Land Trust sfclt.org
SF Tenants Union stfu.org
Tenants and Workers United (Northern Virginia) tenantsworkers.org
Families United for Racial & Economic Equality (Brooklyn) furee.org
People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources (Austin) poder-texas.org
Our Summer of Revolt
by Josh MacPhee

It was the summer of 2001 and it had leaked that MTV’s reality TV show The Real World would be taping in town. The cast and crew had occupied a building on North Avenue in the trendy and gentrified Wicker Park neighborhood. I was part of a group of activist artists that decided we should try to pull some sort of hoax against the show. The Real World was on the crest of corporate America’s attempts to absorb youth culture in order to repackage and sell it as “real” to any teenager with a couple extra bucks in their pocket. The fact that the show was taping in Chicago had already lead to a flurry of press, so we thought we could use this opportunity to introduce a media critique into the media. It was a perfect opportunity to intervene in the spectacle and attempt to undermine the colonization of our lives and lifestyles by multi-billion dollar corporations.

We decided to organize a confrontation, a clash between our lives as we live them and the version of life portrayed by MTV. A flyer was created and distributed throughout the city advertising an “extras” casting party and free alcohol at the Real World building Saturday, July 14th at 11pm. The flyer looked legit and listed the address of the building, which had been largely hidden from the public. We also mobilized everyone we knew in the city to show up that night for what we promised to be the party of the year.

Our organizing must have worked; 250 plus people showed up for the party. It’s difficult to say how many people were in on the joke, but likely the majority. As the 11pm party time rolled past people became more and more agitated and demanded to be let in. MTV was forced to send down someone to tell us there was no party and that we all had to leave. This just upped the energy level, it was our cue to go into action.

While members of the cast were locked up in their loft, we were having the time of our lives outside! A couple hundred people dancing, yelling, talking and making art in the street. We quickly spread out across the entire street, blocking North Ave. to all traffic. Scraps of wood and furniture were dragged out to help keep the streets clear of cars, and people started chalking and painting messages on the sidewalk. Cars were backed up for blocks in every direction since North Ave. is a major weekend thoroughfare. People started lighting fireworks and throwing bottles at the building, raising both the energy and the tension. A megaphone was produced and people took turns attacking the show, MTV and its parent corporation Viacom. Edmar from Lumpen Magazine demanded MTV “Free the Real World 7” (the 7 actors on the show) and that MTV give us all the production equipment so that we could “do something real with it.”

As the crowd got rowdier and rowdier, the two private security guards waded into the street to find the bottle throwers. A bucket of red paint was splashed on the door of the building, causing a small melee and pile of security guards and partiers. This must have been the cue for the police, and within 15 minutes they came in and broke the whole thing up. (Why they allowed us to block traffic for a couple hours is still a mystery...)

And this is where the sense of betrayal comes in. For that hour or two on the street, everyone there knew, not just intellectually, but in their bones and in their hearts, that life outside The Real World, outside MTV, outside capitalist spectacle, was far better and far more fulfilling than what we were being told our lives should be like. For those present in that moment, standing in front of the hip facade of capital, there was no comparison. Capitalism’s TV dreamland was a desert, a wasteland fac-simile of what we were living and how we could
live. Maybe it’s a leap to call that night an insurrection, but I can only describe it as a temporary victory over the alienation that clouds our lives. Time slowed down, each moment demanded to be lived, there was no need to fast forward to the next one. This is a feeling I can’t capture in words, you can’t live through an insurrection vicariously.

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In hindsight maybe we could have done more, we could have tried to occupy the building, rush the door and let everyone in. Maybe we could have held it for a couple hours and the ensuing media circus and police brutality would have shut down the show, or at least made for some very strange episodes of the nightly news. How do you explain a revolt against the privatization of your very life after the fact, in the abstract? When capitalism seems to be the air we breathe, how do you make people understand those moments that seem free of it? It’s hard to get someone to wrap their head around it, as witnessed by the responses to our little street party. The news media took the role of the corporations and the state, attempting to dismiss or pigeon hole the action as a simple, misguided protest against gentrification (of course it was clear to most involved that Wicker Park was already developed beyond the point of protest) and being concerned about the violation of the privacy of The Real World cast (the same people on camera 24 hours a day!). Many political activists and organizers in the city took on the role of the loyal opposition, belittling the action for not being in the service of some specific marginalized group or not having some basic attainable demands (my guess is they were just jealous we had gotten far more people into the streets that they ever could).

There were attempts to hold anti-Real World protests and street parties for a couple additional weekends, but like any revolt that truly touches the source of alienation in daily life, you can’t just simply repeat it, there’s no blueprint or steps to retrace. The first re-run the following weekend led to an immediate assault by the police, shutting down the party before it could happen. They arrested a dozen people and beat up a handful more for good measure. We thought we could just show up and do it better than the week before, completely forgetting that we weren’t the only ones that learned from our experience, the police were taking notes too. Although ultimately MTV and the city lost a civil suit by the arrestees years later, there was little liberatory that night or the weekends following. Over the course of the summer the attempts at street parties in front of the building became less and less spirited, populated by fewer and fewer people. We can’t relive old moments, we need to make new ones.
In late May, a group of Chicago artists hijacked an advertising campaign sponsored by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and turned it back on the city as a vehicle for a biting critique of the CHA’s controversial Plan for Transformation. The artists turned the housing authority’s “CHAnge” campaign into “CHAos.”

The Plan for Transformation, now at its midpoint, has been controversial from its start. Since the start of the 10-year, $1.6 billion effort, CHA has demolished dozens of public housing high-rises throughout the city, and more buildings are slated to fall in the coming months. The Plan’s effects are dramatically visible through the absences it has created. On near South Side, along State Street, just three buildings remain out of the 36 that stood less than five years ago. The corridor is surrounded by empty land and brown fields of grass. Most residents have used Section 8 housing vouchers to relocate into private market housing in low-income, segregated areas burdened by preexisting social and economic problems or have moved into remaining CHA sites.

In the former public housing sites, such as those on south State street, private developers are in the process of constructing “mixed income communities” on land that once was home to thousands of the city’s poorest residents. Unresolved questions shadow the new construction. Strict return criteria - drug tests, no felony convictions, work requirements, no lease violations - mean the number of public housing residents actually able to return to new housing is up in the air. Whatever the outcome, the net effect of the Plan is a dramatic contraction of housing for the city’s most marginalized citizens.

In the fall of 2004, the Chicago Housing Authority rolled out a major advertising campaign about the massive changes to the city’s public housing system. CHA bought $600,000 of ad space in bus shelters, the public transit system and throughout the print media for ads featuring public housing residents lauding the Plan. Designed pro-bono by the Chicago-based Leo Burnett ad agency, each ad features a resident, face impassive and determined, who looks to the horizon and explains the positive changes wrought by the Plan. In one, a senior citizen says she feels “just like the buildings - all brand new.” In another, Maria Mendoza, assistant manager at the Bridgeport Homes says “Everything is new, even my outlook.”

Resident Charles Pinkston says in a third that “public housing is coming to a point I hoped it would - full circle.” The ads were part of a comprehensive rebranding of CHA, one that saw the agency’s logo shift from a New Deal-style graphic of black and white hands shaking in front of high rise buildings to the simple orange “This is CHAne” slogan, a play on the acronym of the housing authority. CHAne provided the artists with the lever they used to turn the agency’s advertising strategy inside out.

What a difference a few letters make. On May 27 and 28, CHAos advertisements went up at prominent spots throughout Chicago. In front of City Hall, CHAos members disguised in maintenance vests and work pants, opened up privately owned bus shelter displays in the middle of the day to install ads. The process was repeated at other shelters and on the public transportation system without a hitch. No one confronted the group during public distribution, except for the occasional curious aside from a passenger on the El.

Joe, an assumed name of one of the principal organizers behind CHAos, said anonymity was an intentional part of the group’s subterfuge (all the names used here are assumed ones). He said legal issues were just one reason the group wanted to maintain anonymity. By not emerging as public speakers about the campaign and Plan, the CHAos group would focus attention on the content of their ads, and the CHA’s actions more broadly.

Joe said the collusion between CHA and Leo Burnett to shape public consciousness about the Plan was among the factors that moved CHAos to respond to the CHAnge campaign.

“CHAnge was trying to close the chapter, seal the deal, end dialogue around public housing. There’s kind of an acknowledgement that public housing went wrong but now the Plan for Transformation is correcting it,” he said. “The way the ad campaign functioned was: the Plan has started, it’s going on in full gear and it’s being successful. People’s experiences are positive. So everything is fine.”

Shelia, another member of the group observed, “the ads said all residents were glad the high rises were coming down, the management of their buildings was going really well and people were having a really good time with their Section 8s. All of those things in our research turned out to be really contentious issues and that people had a diversity of experiences with.”

Members of the group said the context for the CHAos intervention was the strong trend toward privatization in Chicago. From mundane pieces of infrastructure like bus shelters now operated by the French-based company JCDecaux to the sale of the Skyway toll road to private investors to the new space created in public schools for private operators, private monies play a central part of local government operations. Millennium Park, Chicago’s “new front yard” and perhaps the most visible of new projects in the city, was built with a mixture of public and private dollars, but will be closed off to the public on certain dates for corporate fundraisers and events. The CHAos group said they see the Plan for Transformation as both related to these other instances and as transcending them in terms of its human impact. That impact, unlike Millennium Park, is largely invisible, though some news reports and academic studies have demonstrated it in clear terms. A recent Chicago Tribune investigation, for example, found that four in ten buildings used by Section 8 holders fail inspections, leaving voucher holders in unsafe housing.

CHAos organizers said their intervention was designed to sow doubt about the privatizations in Chicago and expose to public scrutiny the political and economic interests of those implementing the Plan for Transformation.

“We tried to be as honest as possible about what these people’s interests in the Plan for Transformation are,” said Phillip, another member of CHAos. “Ostensibly, the CHAnge campaign was about residents who were benefiting from the Plan. We took that at face value and talked about who was actually going to benefit.”

The principals behind the CHAos campaign spent three months researching the recent history of the Plan for Transformation, talking to public housing residents, lawyers and advocates. They drew up a top ten powerbroker list and later winnowed it down to five, including Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, CHA CEO Terry Peterson, two private housing developers and Alfonso Jackson, the Secretary of the federal Housing and Urban Development agency. The ads are blunt: the poster of Mayor Daley poses the question “Are tourists more important than the poor?” The one of Terry Peterson asks “Do Money and Politics Mix?” - a reference to news reports that the Chicago ward where Peterson formerly served as alderman has netted some $250,000 in contributions from CHA contractors in spite of the fact that no CHA buildings are located there. Next to a headshot of Daniel Levin, CEO of the Habitat Co, one of CHA’s private property managers at Cabrini-Green and other developments, the ad asks “Do you like forcing people out of their homes?” In the testimony space on the Levin ad, the CHAos group says that “Time after time, [Habitat] has used legal rulings and court proceedings to prevent public housing residents from moving into the new ‘mixed income’ buildings in their old neighborhoods.”

“This information is publicly available and all of our sources can be cited. Anyone can find them if they do hours and hours of research like we did,” Shelia said. “But none of this information has been presented in this particular fashion. It’s our hope CHAos serves as a public resource for talking about these transformations that are happening.”

“We want honest documentation of the
actual experiences of people to make it into this public conversation and not have the whole thing shut down by PR money,” Phillip said.

One advocate who has collaborated with public housing residents said CHAos brings a refreshing perspective to the discourse about public housing in Chicago. The prevailing discussion about CHA housing, Jamie Kalven said, is “stale and exhausted.” Kalven, whose Web site “A View from the Ground” documents life at Stateway Gardens, said the typical public housing discourse does not “serve to frame the fundamental human rights issues implicated in the Plan for Transformation.” The CHAos intervention, according to Kalven, “opens up space to ask questions about the human realities behind the slogans and advertising imagery.”

“One of the ways the city exercises power is as a conceptual artist. A derelict, half-vacant public housing high rise with unsecured window openings - that’s a statement. A wrecking ball hitting that high-rise is a statement. The vacant lot left by the demolition -- a blank slate awaiting ‘development’-- is a statement. The city uses the built environment to make statements about public policy,” Kalven said. “The CHAos campaign may remind Chicagoans about the importance of public housing redevelopment even though many buildings are gone.

“White liberals get very upset where there’s talk of a conspiracy of institutions and that institutions of government are acting consistently against people’s interests,” Venkatesh said. “They block that out because it’s an uncomfortable thought that institutions don’t serve people. People have a tendency to tune that out. This was an innovative way to keep the issue alive.”

One former resident of the Robert Taylor Homes building at 5100 South Federal, Janice Patton, said she was aware of the CHAos advertisements and even knew one of the persons featured on them.

“I didn’t pay [CHA’s ads] much attention,” Patton said. “I don’t pay attention to what CHA says. They always said the residents tore up the buildings but they were the slum landlord.”

CHA is not happy with the CHAos campaign. New CHAos ads have already been placed in bus shelters. Chuck Levesque, deputy general counsel of CHA called the campaign “churlish” and said the agency is considering “a panoply of actions.” The agency already has sent a letter to the registrant of the CHAos Web site. Kim Johnson, the deputy CHA press liaison, said CHAos was unfair to residents and accused the group of hurting families undergoing relocation.

“From CHA’s perspective, this is a group of individuals who have taken great pains to not let themselves be known,” Johnson said. “You have to wonder, what’s the goal here? At the end of the day, have you helped the families? Our contention is they did not.”

The CHAos organizers have stayed anonymous several months into deployment of their ads and are now contemplating their next steps. If the CHAos ads were, as Kalven said, an exciting breakout from the typical discourse about Chicago public housing, the challenge for CHAos going forward is how to continue pushing the dialogue in new directions. The group is considering whether to distribute counter-advertisements that feature residents’ experiences under the Plan, but that may slip back into the all-too-familiar dueling sets of resident testimony brought out by CHA and its critics.

CHAos started as a reaction. Its next moves may well be determined by the steps the CHA and city take.

http://www.chicagohousingauthority.net/

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This article originally appeared in AREA Chicago #1 Fall 2006 (www.areachicago.org) and a shorter version in the Brooklyn Rail (www.brooklynrail.org)
Protest Experiments

In the weeks leading up to a protest against the Trans-Atlantic Business Dialogue (October 2002), the city’s ears were burning with the news reports about impending violent protesting anarchists converging in the streets, with the installation of thousands of dollars worth of new surveillance technology and riot protection equipment. One television program presented video of police rehearsing for protest repression at a nearby airport. The police played the roles of themselves as well as the “protesters” - putting on full costume and aggressively chanting generic slogans. This media event characterized the current state of affairs - on the heels of the height of the anti-corporate-globalization movement and 9-11-01, the historically acceptable and conventional modes of protest had become so scripted (on the level of role-playing for the police) and control (on the level of surveillance, as well as protestor’s own sense of collective possibility).

At this moment in time a feminist dance troupe was emerging, The Pink Bloque, who combined popular music, uniforms, spectacular dancing and agit-prop to change the social space of the protest. In response to the complete normalization of the trade meetings and their associated protest by the media, another effort included a temporary collective formed around researching the TABD and producing informative agit-prop as well as radical community-building events that would encourage decentralized street actions in the face of the highly controlled protest environment.

The following spring, another group emerged to combat the repression of dissent and pre-determined nature of protest. Feel Tank Chicago envisioned their role as a think-tank that focused on the inherently political dimensions of depression, and its impact on social movements. On May 1, 2003 they held their first annual International Day of The Politically Depressed.

Projects such as the God Bless Graffiti Coalition and Department of Space and Land Reclamation manifest as mythical entities intended to actively occupy and recoup public space and visual culture. Challenging the conventions of resistance and activism, they address major issues such as privatization and the policing of public space through methods that are often playful and ephemeral.

All of the practices presented in this section are celebrations of possibility. They highlight the need for a public sphere and remind us that democratic processes start with the ability of people to congregate, create, and make space together for dissent, or simply for celebration of life, work and play.

Haymarket 8-Hour Action Series

Memories of Haymarket by Nicolas Lampert

In Memory of Michael Piazza 1955-2006

The Haymarket riot in Chicago emerged out of the struggle for the eight-hour workday. On May 1, 1886 a May Day celebration drew over 80,000 protestors in a peaceful demonstration up Michigan Avenue where it was becoming evident that factories would have to honor the workers’ demands. Days later, on May third, violence erupted when police opened fire on strikers at the McCormick Harvester Works. The following night, on May fourth, workers gathered in Haymarket Plaza to condemn the bloodshed of the previous day. As the demonstration came to a close, an undisclosed person threw a bomb, killing policemen and workers alike. The ramifications of the blast would be profound. The police utilized the event to attack organized labor, eventually bringing to trial and executing some of the most significant labor leaders and anarchists in the city. For many, Haymarket would cement the division between workers and bosses, and those executed (four were hanged, one committed suicide, and three were given prison sentences) would become martyrs to the struggle of working class people throughout the world.

In December of 2005, Nicolas Lampert and Daniel Tucker sat down with Michael Piazza, a Chicago-based artist and educator who has been initiating projects around the history of the Haymarket monument since 1986. Piazza was a founding member of Axe Street Arena, a cultural space and gallery that existed from 1985–1989 in Chicago’s Logan Square neighborhood, at the intersection of Kimball, Diversey, and Milwaukee. Axe Street initiated a mail art show with a Haymarket theme in 1986. This interview explores some of the history and contradictions of the various public markers and art that have attempted to commemorate what happened near the corner of Desplaines and Randolph Streets 120 years ago.

1986: the anniversary

Nicolas What happened in 1986?

Michael 1986 was the 100th anniversary of Haymarket, and people from all over the world came to Chicago. As far as I can tell, there was no mainstream press about this at all— but even as something relatively underground, the police presence was extraordinary.

There was this network of events in different parts of the city. You had the Latino community that made altars to the Haymarket “martyrs.” On the anni-versary, there was a meeting at the site. Utah Phillips was there, and you had all the different unions who spoke. That was, and still is, an old parking lot on the other side of the new monument. There had been plans to make a park there, which was more of a priority from labor’s side of things, whereas the anarchists didn’t want a monument at all.

So labor is interested in putting up a monument and the anarchists oppose the very concept of a monument. That sets up an interesting dichotomy.

There was a marker there for a long time, and of course the anarchists put their symbol on it. Then the [recent] statue got built, so I don’t know. There has always been conflict over how one should approach this history.

I heard that in 1986 there were attempts to create guerrilla monuments, and a project to create a citywide curriculum about the history of
Haymarket and May Day. Can you talk about the connection between the citywide projects and the events you did at Axe Street Arena?

M There was a guy named Allan Schwartz who was on the committee to try to tie some of these projects together. Caza Aztlan produced this Latino version of a memorial that was extraordinary. Our group had a mail art show at Axe Street Arena. We produced a show and a catalog of things coming in through the mail for our zine, Panic, and we opened our space for people who were coming in from out of town to crash. The whole mail art show is actually archived at Sangamon University, now known as UI Springfield MEO, with Ron Sakolsky. Labor historian Franklin Rosemont of Charles H. Kerr Press put out The Haymarket Scrapbook that weekend of May third in ‘86. That was another big thing.

Daniel Usually there are very small protests on May Day in Chicago. Have you seen any impressive actions on May Day?

M ‘86 was pretty good. The cops were lined up on Desplaines. There was a red flag contingent [for labor] and an anarchist black flag contingent, and everyone was marching in for this celebration. There were maybe 500 people there, from all over the place. Like I said, we opened up our space and there were parties and events every night around the centennial.

N That is significant. May Day is so marginalized in U.S. history. In Chicago, it is all that more important that the event is given prominence. In this Haymarket-themed issue of Panic, I noticed a story about Chicago artists participating in a Haymarket centennial show in Nicaragua. It seems like a lot of people were involved in it, including yourself, and there was also a show of prints from Nicaragua in Chicago.

M Yes. There was a lot of work that I brought back with me from a trip to Nicaragua, and there was a group that took the work down for the Haymarket show. They did the show at the Sandanistan art school. Because Elizam Escobar [Puerto Rican political prisoner] was in the show it was also important for them; they were trying to develop a museum for Latin American revolutionary painters. Actually, all the work we sent down there is still there, and all the work they sent us is still in Chicago. It was a big deal for them to present Chicago artists showing work with some tie-in to a Haymarket theme.

Eight-hour action series

N Tell us about the Eight-Hour Action Series.

M Ever since 1972, when the statue was removed, the blank pedestal remained with only a plaque that read: "In the Name of the People of Illinois, I command Peace." For nearly 20 years there had been just this pedestal without a statue.

I realized that there was a division between a small group of people in town who knew what it represented, who had this local knowledge and memory, while there was a whole other group who just thought it was an empty pedestal. That always fascinated me. Finally, during the ‘96 Democratic National Convention, the entire pedestal disappeared. Different groups have been doing actions for a long time around that area.

N And these actions are often divorced from one other. I could go out and do an action right now at the site, and not know anything about the history of past actions carried out there. It seems like a constantly contested site.

M It’s interesting how long the pedestal stayed up there before being removed. When it got removed, it left this 18-foot spotlight-like circle. Shortly after that, on May Day in 2001, I went by the site, and Carlos Cortez and Rene Arco pull up in a car. Arco runs out and starts stomping on the site, and I got this idea for a performance called the "Arco Stomp." I put out a call for artists, and suddenly the city comes around and cements over this circle that had been there since ‘86. I’m sure it was a coincidence, but it was strange.

Then, in May of 2002, the "Eight-Hour Action Series" project was initiated. The idea was to have projects that would occupy the site for up to eight hours and that would suggest the vanished history of the site.

One of our first projects was a sewing bee, where we created a large orange circle over the site. We worked all day on this sewing project, and then took a break for lunch. Javier Lara and some students from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago initiated that project.

The next project was by Bertha Husband. She placed a fake street sign right by the site of the statue. Dara Greenwald, Blithe Riley and Lauren Cumbia initiated this "HAY! Market Research" project with a billboard that changed statistics about women’s labor. There was also a survey for passersby about Haymarket history and the site they were standing on. Larry Bogad came out from Philadelphia and did a project called "The Police Statue Returns." He started at the Daley Center and made his way to the site with large puppets of the police statue and Lucy Parsons, and walked all the way there and placed a large Anarchist flag on the site. Then there was this guy Fish who did this saxophone performance. And finally, there was a "soap box" project on the site, and people like John Pittman Webber of Chicago Public Art Group did Eugene Victor Debs prose readings. Bill Adelman also did a historical presentation.

2004: the new monument

N Let’s talk more about the recent monument that was installed in September of 2004.

M I heard that last May Day, a group of Colombi-
an workers went to the new monument and had an official ceremony commemorating their own labor struggles, and then installed an additional plaque. It is interesting to think that it could be used to commemorate other labor struggles and could evolve over time.

I feel like the monument looks just at the event itself—the night when the bomb went off—and ignores how contested the eight-hour struggle was between the workers and the factory owners and the police. It is almost like Picasso’s Guernica for Haymarket: a symbol of an event that does not explain the politics unless you are already aware of the complex history. It references the incident, but does not side with the anarchist martyrs nor with the police. It is a very safe monument.

Well, even the language on the plaque frames it as the Haymarket “tragedy” and every word is chosen very carefully in that way.

I am very interested in that, because it can be argued that a monument at the site is important, but this particular monument dumb down the history to such a great extent, as well as the serious class struggles that surrounded the events. Perhaps it was preferable when it was “the police statue” and not this watered-down, in-between monument.

I think that they should have just left the pedestal. It was important to see something stripped away. I was floored when it disappeared.

That stripping-away you are describing sounds similar to the sites of serious political transition, as in former communist countries. There you have these partial and broken monuments, and you also have contested spaces where the monuments are entirely replaced. In Budapest, they gathered all the old Stalinist statues and put them in a sort of graveyard called “Statue Park,” at the edge of the city.

Absolutely. This is actually why I move to these more temporary strategies of visiting and intervening, like the big orange cloth and tram-poline. They’re like a monument ‘kit’ that can be folded up and brought out when needed.

What are your thoughts on the new monument?

I think my problem is that it is permanent. When I heard about this Colombian labor plaque, I thought that was really interesting because it had the potential to be more flexible.

It must have been a very difficult process to even get that thing into existence. I am not sure what the process was like or how much public input there was. I wonder if there were historians involved. I am not even sure about the art group involved, and how this thing got chosen. I wonder if there was an open call process. I would love to see a show of all the proposals for that process: No monument, many monuments, and different topics—just a real accumulation of ideas.

I don’t think it is a very successful monument. It ultimately dilutes the history of the sharp division that was illustrated when the police monument was there while the workers’ monument was not even allowed within Chicago city limits. I would rather have a monument take a stance. Or perhaps two monuments on the site: one to the martyrs and the other to the police. It could be interesting to see which one is attacked more!

There has even been a push to take the old police statue and put it on that site. Bill Adelman went and said, “Sure you can have the police monument, but not here.”

There are some interesting threads in this discussion about the ways in which monuments reflect the political and cultural climate of the time. First you have the Weather Underground bombing the police statue in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Now this new monument reflects an era of apathy and is totally divorced from what happened. But there is also
the fact that the city and the police are totally resistant to putting any type of radical content into the public landscape, be it a Lucy Parsons park or this contested Haymarket site. It seems especially intense in this city. Obviously, it happens in other cities as well, but in Milwaukee, the city where I am from, a similar incident occurred where workers were killed over the struggle for the eight-hour day. The Bay View Massacre happened the day after Haymarket and consequently received less international attention. The memorial on that site, which is from the perspective of labor, has not been as contested. On the site of the massacre, a plaque and a semicircle of trees dedicated to each worker who was killed were installed by the Wisconsin Labor History Society. The city of Milwaukee took a less defensive stance to the memorial, but here in Chicago, any type of monument to the martyrs is perceived as a threat to the city’s power structure.

D Those are the conditions that make these symbolic temporary monument projects necessary. The highly political way in which space is contested and policed becomes the precondition for us to initiate creative resistance in the public sphere.

N That’s why this new monument seems to come out of nowhere. You have a really intense struggle over an issue, and then out of nowhere this watered-down monument appears.

M I wish I knew what the process was like. Seeing Nathan Mason from the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs out there with these Colombian workers was interesting. With these types of struggles you never know what forces are at work or who is talking to whom.

I’ve heard there are some monuments about the former site of Maxwell Street [Market] being discussed.

The question is, how do you sensitively represent the vendors in that situation? Will the vendors who were kicked out be part of the process? It could be like the Haymarket, where the monument just appears and everything is supposed to be hunky-dory. I really don’t trust monuments.

N The new monument is more problematic, and harder to simply attack, because it makes some gestures towards honoring labor. How does one react to it?

The symbolism of this new monument being so watered down makes the statue at the Waldheim cemetery even more important. Look at all the radicals who have decided to be buried there over the years: Emma Goldman, Joe Hill had his ashes scattered there, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Big Bill Haywood. The list goes on.

M It is kind of like Emma is surrounded by her fans. She is off in the corner, and there are all these people that want to be buried by her—it’s kind of like sectarianism in the cemetery. I heard a story about how in 1986, the anarchists really went to town decorating the statue at the cemetery. So when the labor historians and academics showed up, there were black roses in her arms, and immediately there was this academic scuffle! I wish I had a picture of them duking it out and then a person ripping the black roses out of the statue’s arms and replacing them with red roses. Every year they put their red roses.

For more information on Michael Piazza see www.stockyardinstitute.org

Originally published in AREA Chicago #2 (www.areachicago.org)
God Bless Graffiti Coalition, Inc.

The GBGC has been involved in street art advocacy since 2002. Our pro-graffiti publications, including the “Give Graffiti The Thumbs Up” brochures and “Graffiti Loves You” bible tracts, have been distributed in the tens of thousands by hand, in information kiosks, and through a system of “borrowed” newspaper boxes redecorated with our logos and messages. In addition, we organize large scale events and exhibitions, which have included hundreds of graffiti writers, street artists and supporters over the past five years.

Pink Bloque
by the Pink Bloque, updated by Rachel Caidor and Dara Greenwald (2005)

The ladies of the Pink Bloque initially knew each other through involvement in the punk and independent music scene, or through organizing for Ladyfest Midwest Chicago. Some were actively involved in radical politics; others were interested in politics but had never been active; all of us were looking for a more creative way to enact our political beliefs. We found some of the radical left’s 60s protest tactics and didactic rhetoric alienating and ineffective at engaging the larger public—so we decided to make protests more fun and more visually engaging by using the sounds, images and lingo of contemporary corporate popular culture.

Many of us paid a lot of attention to [and sometimes participated in] different resistance projects like Reclaim the Streets, the Department of Space and Land Reclamation, Critical Mass, and the Bread and Puppet Theatre. We were inspired by their practices of taking up public space for both celebratory and political purposes. We also read a lot about how groups ranging from the Suffragists to ACT UP used popular performance and culture to convey their messages to the public. In 1999 the anarchist black bloc was making news for its direct action tactics at the anti-World Trade Organization protests in Seattle. The coverage of these actions re-introduced the notion of “protest” into US popular discourse while shifting the image of a protester from 1960’s hippie to 21st century anarchist. In the year 2000, thousands of protestors in pink took to the streets for the anti-corporate globalization protest surrounding the meeting of the International Monetary Fund in Prague, adding another evocative image to our notions of what protest looked like. Inspired by this spectacle, we chose to adopt pink as our signature color.

Our first date was in November of 2001 at a protest against the bombing of Afghanistan. We wore pink. There were thirty other people clad in drab colors and two wizards. We felt uninspired and ineffective. Then, in March of 2002, we decided to step it up.

At the Pink Bloque’s first official meeting, we were introduced to Darrin Hensen, choreographer for such popular acts as Britney Spears and N'Sync. His $29.95 video promised to teach us to dance just like these stars! With this promise in mind, we decide that choreographed dance routines would become our protest tactic. Other important Bloque traditions materialized at this gathering: meeting and eating, finding the cutest pink clothes around, and making the streets of Chicago safe for roving dance parties. Oh yeah, and we also did the usual meeting kinds of things, like talking about process, tactics, and points of unity. The Pink Bloque decided that our approach to revolutionizing radical politics would combine cute outfits, astute social/political/economic/cultural criticism, catchy slogans inspired by pop music, and dance routines, dance routines, dance routines - in short, we brought the radical booty shake to street protest
The 7 P's of the Pink Bloque Philosophy

Protest - Giving the look of protest a makeover!

Public space - Should be for dancing and dialogue!

Performance - Making a spectacle to be heard!

Popular culture - We draw people in with familiar sights and sounds to open them up to the message of social justice!

Pinkness and Femme-inism - We bring femme back to feminism and activism by exploring what it means to be pink and political.

Party - Dance party, that is

Partnership - Working in collaboration towards a better and cuter world.

and demonstrations!

The Pink Bloque had our coming out party on May Day 2002. We expected a huge crowd for our party, but there was a dismal turnout that day. We set up camp by ourselves in front of City Hall and started dancing to Donna Summer’s “She Works Hard for the Money.” Although we did not have a “choreographed” routine, we cart wheeled into the hearts and minds of Chicago’s downtown lunch crowd and by deploying “tactical flirting” to keep police at bay, we were able to hand out flyers about wage inequity. The action was nothing like we expected...but it was a success for us despite the unfortunate camel toe pants we were all wearing. We were pleased by the crowd’s reaction and so we began to plan future actions.

We decided to enlist more booties to get down - the Bloque party began to grow. At the first open meeting six new people joined. Later, as more Bloquers moved away for love and for Women’s Lives, we felt that no longer wanted to stage our actions within the US supported occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and the US supported occupation of Palestine.

We decided that we would go on tour and share our love of the dance and our hate of the UnJustified US policies put forth in the USA PATRIOT Acts 1 and 2, FCC deregulation, as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the US supported occupation of Palestine.

We wanted to tour the East coast and complete our journey, like so many cultural and political sideshows before us, at New York’s historical anarchist community center, ABC no Rio! Because we did not have major [or even indie] record labels paying for our vans or outfits, and we were not selling tickets to throngs of fans at stadiums, we had to do some serious fundraising to finance our trip.

After the tour some of us were interested in the potential for organizing larger dance actions. While continuing to do smaller, local actions we planned ahead to The March for Women's Lives in April 2004 in Washington, DC and for the Republican National Convention in NYC the following August. In order to facilitate a larger dance action, we put a dance instructional video on our website and promoted that people learn it and meet us first in DC and later in NYC. Many people practiced the dance from the on-line video and met us to "Take a bite out of the right!"

After spending lots of energy and resources organizing for these national actions, we no longer wanted to stage our actions within larger, permitted demonstrations. We felt that our autonomous actions were more effective because they contained an element of surprise. As any military strategist or “Punk’ed” producer can tell you, the element of surprise is key to effective tactics.

However much we wanted to continue, our energy was waning and members kept moving away or planning to move away. We talked about getting new members but no one seemed to have the energy to organize another open meeting. We finally had a "coming to Jesus" with each other in which each member had a chance to speak and say how they felt about the future of the Pink Bloque and their own ability to stay involved. Although we agreed that audiences liked what we did, some of us no longer found our tactic innovative or creative to participate in. Some members wanted to keep going and others felt that it was time to break up and start booking appearances on The Surreal Life along with other performance-as-protest has beenes. No one can claim we were drunk with success [despite occasionally being drunk with alcohol]. We weren’t interested in perpetuating ourselves just because we had support. Success for us ultimately was not about recognition. Success for us was finding a way to stay politically involved and finding ways to effect social change. We are all now looking in different directions. Our final action was getting together to write this text, because if we don’t write our own histories, no one will.

www.pinkbloque.org
The Department of Space and Land Reclamation

DSLR was a weekend campaign of April 27, 28, and 29th, in 2001 that attempted to reclaim all the space, land and visual culture of Chicago back to the people who work for it, live in it and create it.

Reclamation projects, those that actively trespassed with the intent to resist, took place across the city and throughout the weekend. Whether they were spilling out of the sewers, taking the parks, invading the steps of City Hall, scrambling up trees or cramming the sidewalks, these projects actively engaged everyday life. A huge array of measures were taken to infuse Chicago with the passion that a socially conscious movement demands.

The theme of this exhibition came out of discussions where we, a small collective of responsible citizens, recognized a pattern among a diverse range of art and activist practices. As the movement to resist capital and control grows to global proportions, artists/activists/radical citizens have once again found common ground. The umbrella term, reclamation, seems to encompass the wide array tactics in use. Whether this is through squatting, guerilla gardens, pirate radio, graffiti, hacking, billboard manipulation or performative public interventions, these practices all resist the encroachment of top down centralized control and private capital. Projects of reclamation situate the producer at a critical intersection of power. It is at this nexus that we intended to position the DSLR campaign. Important in this goal was the connecting of people with disparate practices and backgrounds. We hoped to reveal connections and energize people on the robust range of strategies that are possible.

-From Counterproductiveindustries.com/dslr
The Manipulative City
(Reprinted from the 2001 DSLR catalogue)

“The spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space.”

—Henri Lefebvre “Plan of the Present Work” and “Social Space” from The Production of Space (1974)

Global capital has reached such a point that both the physical and intellectual landscape have been completely purchased. To exist today means to tread on the property of others. The city has increasingly become a space completely built around consumerism. The freedom of expression has come to mean the freedom to advertise. Advertisements on billboards, advertisements on public buses and trains, advertisements on benches, advertisements on clothes, advertisements on radio, advertisements on television, advertisements on menus. Like a minefield of manipulative codes, urban space has been designed to maneuver us from one point of sale to the next. Racist and classist anti-loitering and anti-gang laws have been instituted across the country as increasingly individuals and cultures are illegalized to protect rising property values.

The search for greater market returns and the increased role of the “global city” in the information age has resulted in an explosion of the phenomena known as gentrification. Gentrification reveals itself in the relocation of entire lower income communities out of the now coveted inner city. Generally, artists move into a low-income area paving the way for a steady stream of “young urban professionals.” Some forms of resistance to this process include community groups lobbying to retain rent controls, squatters refusing to leave their homes when they are evicted and somewhere in the North of Chicago, a glorious vandal has been spraypainting “Yuppies go home” on the doors of new condos. (Currently a $5000 reward is being circulated for her head).

Not only are we on borrowed land, we are also on borrowed ideas. The increased litigation over intellectual property rights has made simply the expression of ideas a nest of law suits and corporate intimidation. Whether this is in the form of patented genetically modified corn to patented AIDS medication to Mickey Mouse, the land of ideas has been fully purchased and commodified as well. Additionally, the entertainment industry has quickly moved in and absorbed every point of radical culture, with raves, Punk, skateboarding, and Hip-Hop rapidly dismantled into salable pieces. Selling out culture is just another example of the manner in which the creative products of culture are quickly alienated and sold back to their producers.

Escaping the Catch-22 of Political Art

In order to develop a stronger foundation, some myths about social action must be quickly put to rest. There is a familiar rhetorical trap that occurs around the subject of political art. Artists who’s work is too imaginative, reckless, wild, and beautifully useless are accused of being complicit within the structure of the status quo. Their own imagination ends up at war with the demands of their social conscience. On the flipside, artists whose work is straightforward and political are generally accused of being too didactic and lacking critical complexity. Their critic’s arguments tend to quickly show themselves as protectors of the art world and capitalist status quo. In the end, it appears to be a lose/lose situation and as such, it has turned off many an artist to the demands of being political.

What is to be done? Anything looked at in and of itself will eventually resolve itself in failure. One object/practice/person/idea can not encompass all the elements which comprise a socially conscious revolutionary movement. Quite clearly, the modernist conception of art as a separate aspect from daily life fails miserably and contemporary art has yet to take this lesson to heart. In isolation all things stand alone and are mute. It is through the rich diverse fabric of collective action that private expression gains meaning.

In the DSLR campaign, a motley assemblage of activists/artists/citizens have come together to launch a robust revolutionary movement. Artists whose work may appear fanciful or hermetic in isolation now gain the strength of participating in a radical community. It is through the commitment to a larger cohesive resistance that our individual actions take shape. Once peered through this larger lens, new practices can come into focus.

The DSLR campaign will only last for this weekend, but we do not want the energy generated to dissipate. We encourage everyone to join in on the May Day events this Tuesday and to attend our follow-up discussion and showing of the DSLR video documentary on June 9, 2001 at the Stockyard Institute 4741 S. Damen Avenue. We are quite serious in the belief that projects of reclamation both connect us in a struggle for social justice and also provide a blueprint for more dynamic modes of existence. DSLR hopes these actions will help foster a community in Chicago that is readily equipped to articulate the problems here and to move forward on collaborative, creative interventions for the future. We believe our compass is pointing in the right direction. Take to the streets. Take back what is ours. Overthrow the systems of capital and control!
MEDIA ALERT:
To Commemorate The First Annual International Day Of The Politically Depressed Feel Tank Chicago hosts a Parade and Depress-In(1)
Where: Outside the State of Illinois Building (aka the James R. Thompson Center, at the corner of Clark and Randolph, near Clark/Lake El)
When: Thursday, May 1, 2003, 4-6 pm


Feel Tank Chicago is a group of local activists, artists, and academics who are part of an international movement to analyze and counter the orchestration of public feelings in the political sphere. Depression is a political emotion. Apathy is a response. We’re numbed, flooded, saturated, overwhelmed – we’re DEPRESSED – we’re politically depressed.

Notes: 1. In the long tradition of teach-ins, sit-ins, kiss-ins, die-ins, barf-ins, and napk-ins. 2. Cancelled in China due to SARS. 3. www.feeltankchicago.net 4. Flotsam, jetsam, fallout, garbage, waste, trash, junk, shards, sweepings
Trans-Atlantic Business Dialogue

Hidden from public scrutiny and armed with the protection of the Chicago Police, the Trans-Atlantic Business Dialogue (TABD) Conference brought together large European and North American corporations with high-level government officials to develop the public policy of corporate globalization and set the agenda for the WTO. An ad-hoc group researched and produced educational media for the mobilization, including the “Trans-Atlantic Business Monologue” wheatpaste poster and a bilingual TABD “disinvitation”. They distributed hundreds of CEO Vampire Teeth to police and protesters and followed the actions with a raucous Business vs. Pleasure wrestling and pinata party.
Social Reorganization
Day after day, we are ruthlessly caught up between an interpersonal alienation of our working and living conditions and an increasing shrinkage of viable public spaces, and the overwhelming mediation of information as it flows through corporate and state command. Is it no wonder then that we are desperate to imagine a 'commons'; for alternative social spaces and alternative production models built with mutual aid, dialogue, solidarity, and diversity at their core. In the post-9/11 years in Chicago, many interesting social spaces, both permanent and temporary, were launched for local network-building and open information and resource sharing. A few of these include the **Pilot TV** convergence, the celebration of local groups known as **The Autonomous Territories of Chicago**, the ongoing carnival of open-ended dialogue known as **Ask-Me!**, and the resource sharing science-fair known as **iNFO-eXPO**. While more sustainable long-term spaces are of needed for social movements to thrive, these temporary experiments all helped to build new relationships, cross-pollinate practices, and imagine alternative models for communication, learning, media production, distribution, and economic reorganization.

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**Pilot TV: Experimental Media for Feminist Trespass**

PILOT TV is a hybrid activist convergence taking the form of a do-it-yourself television studio. We invite you to take part in 4 days and nights of participatory, creative problem-solving to rethink how we “stage” protest. Help us turn this three-story Chicago building into a fully functioning Hollywood studio, replete with fantastical sets, collaborative crews, and improvised madness.

Stage a panel discussion as a talk show, lead a workshop as a cooking show, get behind a camera, sew a costume, party all night, or just show up and get involved in the conversation. PILOT will be an open-ended space for those of us involved in the global anti-capitalist movement to come together in sweat-space, build momentum, and strategize our biopolitical resistance on (and off) camera.

As the last vestiges of public space, natural resources, and community-control are bought-off; our bodies will continue to be the final line in the struggle for autonomy. Join us at the PILOT laboratory for 4 days of fleshy resistance, aesthetic experiments and tactical performance! Trespass the corporate control of media with nomadic TV, pirate radio broadcasts, and guerilla drive-in screenings! Enjoy parties, community meals, and do things on camera that you could never do legally in real life!

--From the original call for participation
Building a Temporary Autonomous TV Studio
by Emily Forman and Daniel Tucker

editor’s note: This text appeared in Issue #4 of the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest and Sections of this article were originally published in Clamor Magazine

Imagine a three story media production studio that appears for one weekend, brings hundreds of queer and feminist independent media producers together for the video taping and staging of their own “television shows,” talk shows, historical reenactments and skill-sharing workshops. In October, Pilot TV did just this by creating a unique space for collaboration, asking questions and building community in a wonderful and experimental temporary autonomous television studio.

Daniel So where did the idea for Pilot come from?

Emily Well, in initial conversations between another organizer, James Tsang, and myself, we kept throwing around this word, this idea of “Transfeminism.” We were excited that it had no set definition and thought it might have some possibility in terms of encompassing a wide variety of new feminist concerns (and old concerns as well, like the idea that biology shouldn’t control your destiny...) Our conversations about defining transfeminism quickly multiplied into all these other slogans and exclamations of our desires for “Body Flight!” and “Feminist Trespass!” against biopolitical control and capitalism. Our basic idea was that we should work these questions with our peers in a productive, performative, open-ended space. It eventually was settled that we would call people from across the continent to come and take part in a weekend of collaborations producing feminist television “pilots”, which would then be edited, compiled, and redistributed back to all participants so they could distribute them on their local public access channels, schools, or microcinemas wherever they live. This would also have the effect of building a new network of anti-capitalist transsexuals, queers, and feminist media producers for possible future action.

Daniel Can you mention some of the models, other events and projects that Pilot was inspired by?

Emily In addition to those influences, we decided that Pilot should take the best aspects of both protest convergence center and a Hollywood TV studio. The thing that is so exciting about these convergence/hub spaces that develop during large protests is that they become these participatory sweat-spaces where all sorts of interactions are possible and are activated just by filling a room with people, resources, and passions. We imagined that this potential for collective self-realization would be multiplied if we threw the variables of a TV studio (sets, props, cameras) into the mix. I find often that the experience of engaging in a convergence center is a lot more meaningful, both personally and politically, than the foregrounded “protest” itself. These are places where people are coming together, teaching each other, sharing workshops and food, housing each other and practicing direct democracy.

E Another element in the Call for Participation mentioned that Pilot was an event to rethink how we (as activists) “stage protest.” How do we stage protest? How can an experimental event format like Pilot inform how we protest?

Emily Looking at protest as something that is “staged” as opposed to natural allows you to be strategic in how you interrogate the meaning and effectiveness of a collective action. Consider that “demonstrations” are just that; mass performances where we demonstrate this fairly scripted scenario where people march, hold signs, reach catharsis, scuffle with police, hold candles, etc. In fact, this performance is so well scripted that police agencies often “rehearse” it, casting undercoveractors in our roles, and compensating for any “improvising” we may try to do.

Clearly what needs to happen is a total rethinking of the project of social protest and what we do with the agency of collectives. The premise during Pilot was to make this performative nature transparent in order to open it up for poetic, aesthetic, and practical restaging. We shared a really wide array of possibilities with each other; from direct political interventions like the Women on Waves pirate abortion ship to the intimate performance of John and Yoko’s “Bed-In” against the war in Vietnam.
D There were more than 35 different "shows" that were taped during the weekend including a talk show called "Feeling good about feeling bad" which focused on the experience of political depression, a performative lecture by the Society for Biological Insurgents, and a genderqueer erotic remake of the 1925 Eisenstein film Battleship Potemkin. Considering all of the kinds of shows that happened during the weekend, what were people trying to figure out?

E We were trying to educate each other about the incredibly rich history of feminist media activism, and some of the early utopian proposals for what video and television might be. The popular meaning of feminism has been whittled down to these very narrow cliches, but in fact it is a set of essential tools for ethical social practice and resistance to patriarchy, hierarchy, and capitalism. As far as trans-feminism relating to media democratization, we didn’t privilege either one as a concern. We saw them as coexistent and interdependent struggles. I guess it is on this level that feminism most strongly informs anti-capitalist movements today.

Our concern during the weekend was about doing activism from the level of the body up. Starting with how we meet our basic needs for food or healthcare, up to things like how we resist oppressions based on race, citizenship, gender, or sexuality, our position as laborers and consumers in the global economy, the importance of feelings, the bodies made up by our families, communities, and cities.

D The founding document that you sent out read, “Calling all trans-activists, women, queers, male feminists, media activists, intersexed hackers, radical educators, genderchangers, direct-actors, performance artists, anti-racists, mothers, documentarians, prop collectors, youth video collectives, squatters, fence-climbers, cyber-feminists, urban farmers, prison abolitionists, women’s health-care providers, all-girl graffiti crews, resistant bodies and trespassers of all kinds!!!” Did that happen?

E Well I am not sure if there were actually any intersexed individuals who were also “hackers”, but basically yes. It felt unlike any other activist convergence or media context I’ve ever been in, in the sense that the majority of people participating and coordinating technology were all women, or had at one point been a woman, or were becoming women!

D So you have talked about the ways in which Pilot responded to the conference and protest models of social space, but what about the Hollywood influence? When I rode my bike down to Bridgeport (the neighborhood in Chicago where Pilot took place), I came across a huge sign on the hill by the highway reading “PILOTWOOD!” Hollywood is a pretty messed up place in a lot of ways, how did it serve as inspiration?

E Well, it’s inspiring in the sense that there is so much symbolic wealth there! As a LA native I really think people need to be fucking with the spatial referents remaining in Hollywood, you know, like staging takeovers and sit-ins at news stations, or doing direct actions in the guise of a movie shoot. In terms of Pilot, the main thing we were appropriating was the Fordist vertical-integration model of media production, where everything happens “in-house.” While production has been decentralized incredibly, there is still this phenomena where tons of skilled individuals with cameras, lights, scripts, and makeup will come together into one building in the morning and at the end of the day a television show will come out. For Pilot we borrowed this myth of the Hollywood studio and got rid of the unnecessary hierarchical divisions between producers, directors, actors, and audience members.

One of the problems we encountered was that there just wasn’t enough set up and breakdown time for people to shoot 9 TV shows a day, even with the three sets we had. Because of this there wasn’t enough time for the education of people with less technical expertise, so hierarchies of knowledge were set up due to a sped-up production schedule. Some of the problems at Pilot can be worked out in future events. And there did seem to be a big interest on the part of participants in making that happen. Maybe it will turn into a more permanent studio, or possibly a mobile production house like the soviet cinema trains.

D In terms of the actual productive capabilities of Pilot, it would be helpful if you could elaborate on the different ways in which resources were pooled and technology was acquired. Did Pilot have fundraisers or grants?

E No, we didn’t have any grants but we raised maybe a hundred bucks and built community prior to the event with a call-out zine and CD, conversations, show-and-tells, and a weekly speakeasy restaurant that we ran out of various apartments called the Secret Café. Quite a bit of the A/V equipment was acquired through a parasitic technique where individuals with access privileges at jobs or art schools worked together to leverage large chunks of equipment for everyone during the weekend. Meanwhile, everyone who came contributed some kind of resource to the pool, whether it was their construction skills or their DV camera or their wig collection.

D And in the end?

E Pilot proved that it is possible build a TV studio without ANY money whatsoever, that with self-organization and collective resource sharing we can build alternative infrastructures that are equally as fantastic and sustainable as anything made for the traditional capitalist economy! All in all, the weekend was an incredibly packed and complex experience. It was marked by lots of improvisation, pleasure, dialogue, public sex, failure, creative television production, skill sharing, and countless new relationships. I can’t speak for the rest of the Pilot participants, but I know I experienced community the way I would like it to be everyday; queer as fuck, and experimenting together ...for all the trespassing to come.

www.pilotchicago.org
The Autonomous Territories of Chicago (ATOC)

ATOC was a project planned for a traditional gallery (the Hyde Park Art Center) and one of the few examples in this book of a project with funding, in this instance through a $1000 grant from the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs. The idea behind ATOC was simple, invite a number of different art, activist, and community groups doing exciting work around Chicago to come to a utopian carnival and fair and pretend they were Autonomous Territories, i.e., what would their practice look like if they were not under the heel of the city, state or capitalism. Unfortunately right before all of this was to come together September 11th happened, and the program had to be altered. Still six booths or stands were built for groups to present their utopias (including God’s Gang, who brought live chickens and a rooster!), but the carnival was also designed around distributing alternative information about September 11th, the Bush regime, and what was actually happening the United States and Afghanistan at that time. A giant 40 foot long flow chart was painted on the wall which presented connection between government officials, corporations, guns, money and drugs. Packets of alternative info were handed out as DJ’s spun records, a rooster crowed, poets read, and people learned how to post their own news on Indymedia.

Groups present included Gods Gang, Temporary Services, Haymarket 8 Hour Action Series, Stockyard Institute, Chicago Indymedia, Nance Klehm’s food foraging tour, Labor Donation Bike Repair, and People’s Republic of Delicious Food.
ASK ME!

For this interactive installation, Gallery 2 will become the site of a large social situation that could be experienced as performance art, living theater, a happening, social fair or swap meet. ASK ME! promotes the exchange of information simply for the types of engagement, exchange and pleasure that can be realized with face-to-face communication. The ASK ME! exhibit will consist of 15 information booths attended by friendly, talkative people who are eager to discuss specific topics with the audience members who approach them. Their areas of expertise will represent a range of approaches to knowledge (scientific, historical, cultural, psychological, theoretical, personal, experiential) and methods for its acquisition (professional, academic, personal, hobby, obsession, fandom). By equalizing various types of “expertise” (e.g., empirical research and bodily experience) this exhibit offers a consideration of what constitutes a body of knowledge and how it is defined, determined and valued.

Participants will have a highly individual experience based on what they are curious about, how they direct themselves through the exhibit, how they assimilate the experience as a whole, and what problems or questions it raises for them. The experts and the audience will create the piece, which is a self-directed set of curated conversations. In this sense, the project has a high degree of indeterminacy and will be experienced and valued in singular ways. However, this sort of multifaceted, unpredictable exchange between people may be a context to reflect upon how we come into contact with new knowledge, what type of public forums we participate in, for making comparisons between interpersonal and mass-mediated forms of communication, and for appraising our rapidly changing routes of information delivery.

Each booth will be clearly labeled by subject matter and equipped with ice-breaker questions to help people navigate topics that they are less familiar with. For example:

- Ask me what it is like to be a professional dominatrix!
- Ask me why it is possible to travel into the future but not the past!
- Ask me why the Klan blew Robert E. Lee’s head off of Stone Mountain in 1927!
- Ask me about the life and teachings of the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)!
- Ask me how to scan your body for stored traumatic memories!
- Ask me what yoga has in common with early film technology!
- Ask me how US corporations and Saddam Hussein are benefiting from the sanctions against Iraq!

Audience members are also encouraged to station themselves at the blank booth, declare a subject category of their own, and field questions in their own area of expertise.

--from the original ASK ME! project proposal

ASK ME! was organized in 2001 by Laurie Jo Reynolds at Gallery 2 and co-curated with Mary Patten at the 1926 Exhibition Studies Space. In 2003, it was presented by Chicago County Fair at the Chicago Cultural Center and then commissioned by the Museum of Science and Industry. ASK ME! participants have included a quantum physicist, a professional dominatrix, a WWII conscientious objector, family members of Tamms Supermax prisoners, an organic farmer, an intersex activist, a video artist, a labor history professor, a sleep researcher, a dialect coach, a mixologist, an imam, blind people, and a four-year old Power Ranger enthusiast. ASK ME! subjects have included the Stone Mountain Confederate monument, IQ and SAT testing, sexual abuse and body memory, cosmology, midwifery, pre-MTV televised soul music, the ether, time management, Pullman porters, pirate radio, prairie restoration, plane crashes and the inner ear, the sanctions against Iraq, monster trucks and free unprofessional advice.
MEDIA ALERT:

VERSION>04 InvisibleNetworks Media Festival presents
INFO eXPO: Arts and Activist Information Fair at the Chicago Cultural Center
78 E. Washington, Chicago IL 60602

April 28 and 29, 2004 11-2pm on Both Days

Not satisfied by online contact? Want to meet people doing radical art in Chicago and from other cities? The Nfo Xpo networking fair offers an opportunity for you to meet art and activist collectives from Chicago, representatives of other cities and people with ideas who are initiating exciting new projects. This face to face networking opportunity allows you to meet other artists working in your field and to ask people questions directly.

Learn about new projects going on in your own city and elsewhere! Share resources! Meet possible collaborators! The iNfo eXpo Networking Fair (pronounced “Info Expo”) will feature a wide variety of projects and practices that range from a mobile public reading room to a presentation on the future of transportation in Chicago’s SouthEast side.

Through the simple presentation format of a booth, based on a science fair model, we will facilitate straight-forward exchanges about what is going on locally in various communities, from different disparate neighborhoods, to other American cities and friends from far away visiting Chicago for Version>04. Over twenty-five artists and collectives will have presentation booths: 16 beaver Group, Angels of Def, Animal Factory, Antigravity, Bikecart Infoshop and Open Air Public Reading Room, Cabalster, Carbon Defense League, Champaign Urbana IL, Chicago Indymedia, Chicago Gray Line, Children’s Studio Presents, Chris Wildrick, Chronozone 2, College of Complexes, Cooperative Image Group, Drag Kings, FeelTank Chicago, Films and Cities, Free Walking, Genewise, Gentrification Game, Grand Rapids Michigan, Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, Locus, Lumpen, Microrevolt, The Network of Casual Art A/V Dept., The Neighborhood Writing Alliance, Las Non Gratas Class, Quimbys, Red 76 Arts group, The Stockyard Institute, Temporary Travel Office, Toyshop Collective, Pilot TV, VersionFest, and We The People Media.

The NFO XPO is being presented as part of Version>04: InvisibleNetworks. Version>04 is a hybrid form of festival, conference, arts fair taking place throughout Chicago from April 16- May 1st, 2004. The festival, in its third year, is an experimental approach at navigating, presenting and discussing the activities of emerging cultures that combine visual arts, activism, social practices, creative use of new technologies as well as tactics of public intervention. For more information go to: www.versionfest.org
by Ava Bromberg

“...the vision of new possibilities requires only the recognition that scientific discoveries can be used in at least two opposite ways. The first leads to specialization of functions, institutionalization of values, and centralization of power and turns people into the accessories of bureaucracies or machines. The second enlarges the range of each person’s competence, control and initiative, limited only by the other individual’s claims to an equal range of power and freedom.” - Ivan Illich Tools of Conviviality

Before I reflect on what urban planning is and what it could be, who plans and for what purpose, I would like to call attention to a few things:
1) We have never had a right to housing in the United States.
2) We all deserve decent shelter, access to healthy food, a chance to learn and engage with diverse forms of knowledge, to have a say in the decisions that shape our environments, to earn a living that we can stand, to root ourselves and our families somewhere if we so please, to explore our potential and articulate our needs and desires in our own voice.
3) Not to have access to these is unjust.
4) To secure equal access to these will require a massive shift in how we conceive and activate our inextricably linked “political-economies” at every scale (from the body and the home, to the street corner, the neighborhood, the city, the region and beyond the boundaries of nation-states.)
5) As the projects in this volume, and recent scholarly writings make plain, under neoliberal capitalism, “urban governing institutions have been restructured so that they can better respond to the needs of capital. They are becoming less a democratic forum for citizens to make decisions and more a tool to ensure the area competes effectively for capital investment.” (1) Examples in Chicago and elsewhere abound. It is within this unsatisfactory and unjust inherited condition that our work begins.
6) The real living conditions of people already settled somewhere – and our basic right to dwell, to inhabit the city, should be more important and powerful than a promise of profit from a potential population that does not yet exist. Pushing the (economically) weaker to the wall, or, in the case of displacement, always to a further edge of the city is unsustainable as well as unjust.
7) And if we want to change this? We might, as Mark Purcell suggests, move forward in demanding the necessary shift by activating a deep understanding of what Henri Lefebvre called the “right to the city,” which, “conceived of more generally,” Purcell argues, “as the right to inhabit – the right to participate centrally in the decisions that shape one’s everyday life.... opens the door to a new citizenship and a new politics in which the decisions that produce space are made through deliberation among inhabitants, rather than through negotiation between capital and the state.” (2) He goes on to say that while such participation does not, “necessarily guarantee a more just political economy. It does, however, point to a more democratic politics in which the current control of capital is undone, and a vibrant debate among inhabitants engages fundamental questions about the structure and purpose of global political economy.” (3)

What is Urban Planning?

With these points in mind, we can turn to the field of urban planning. It is useful to talk about planning because the landscape we’ve inherited is how we know what remains undone, and – at some point – elements of this landscape were on a planner’s desk. Planning operationalizes whatever “structure and purpose of the global political economy” is being enacted, whether decided upon democratically or not). Thus, even if we cannot agree from the start whether planning is a site of intervention, we can mine its knowledge, histories, and operating logics before we decide.

To glaze too briefly over multiple histories that deserve more attention: ideas about planning have their roots in anarchist and utopian socialist thinking of the mid-late 1800s but – even from its early beginnings – planning in practice has never successfully challenged dominant notions of private property. And although there have been attempts to use planning (particularly regional planning) to achieve a more even distribution of social costs and benefits (mainly during the Keynesian moment of state welfare), its processes have been readily employed to aid in the consolidation of capital, consistently privileging profit maximization over the needs of residents.. While volumes of Marxist and neo-Marxist analysis call into question the very possibility of “more even” distribution within a capitalist system for which uneven development is a function of the basic structure of wealth accumulation, it is equally important to note that planning – for all its faults and failures – remains one of the few possible sites of powerful interference in development. City planners can create wildly expensive delays for developers, just as city officials can halt progress on a project that does not provide sufficient community benefits. It is perhaps the hallmark of the neoliberal city, however, that problematic projects are often pushed through more quickly by the same public servants. Under the rationale where stimulating private investment and development is the goal, cities want to keep costs down for the developer and get projects built faster in order to maximize the revenue stream for the city. In this climate, we have the dual challenge of showing that the economic logic is flawed and unjust while applying the necessary political pressure as we assert our basic right to the city. If we see the city as starting point for activating justice broadly, then a radical agenda may be best served by acknowledging that development is inevitable. Development happens and it impacts us all in direct and indirect ways. So we don’t simply have to contest it, we have to change the way it works, how decisions are made, and whose interests get developed.

Their Planning

There is every indication on the landscape that most city and private sector planners proceed unquestioningly to fulfill the desires of the paying client; they operationalize the same logic of creating ever more efficient and profit-maximizing systems that characterizes neoliberal projects broadly. That is clear enough from reading most major city’s strategic plans, from looking at what practicing planners are trained to do, and examining the conditions that projects on these pages respond to.

Yet I am struck by an unmistakable (and under-interrogated) irony in the post-Keynesian urban landscape. It is often asserted that, in the absence of federal funding for social programs, cities have had to adopt “entrepreneurial” strategies to raise revenue to perform basic (and we might (wrongly?) assume) social functions. Cities make concessions to encourage large-scale developments like Millennium Park, or to enable the Chicago Housing Authority’s “Plan for Transformation”. Cities compete with each other, offering major corporations tax breaks to relocate their headquarters to their city (Boeing, for example). They choose to maximize retail square footage in new developments even where housing is in short supply because of the increased potential for revenue from retail space. City marketing, stadium construction, and most recently, catering to the preferences of the so-called “creative class” have begun to dominate the visioning process for many city managers and planners. Yet I feel the entire project warrants serious reassessment if, in the process of raising revenue, cities forsake (or displace) the individuals and communities they are ostensibly supposed to be raising money to support in the first place. (And they do). If we have lost sight of (or collectively ignore in the neoliberal city) that behind urban strategies and the social programs they fund are real people, not just protocols, then I suggest we all revisit this very basic starting point.
Our Planning

Radical planning, a concept articulated by John Friedmann, calls for nothing short of the broad transformation of society and social relations—through the accumulation of small acts that empower individual citizens, and the critical interrogation of structures and conditions that disempower them. This idea informs many of the organized, locally rooted and globally networked efforts to attain more just environments within or parallel to the dominant modes and processes of planning. For Friedmann, planners’ work rests at a juncture of theory and practice. They bring particular knowledge of mobilization skills, facility with group process, knowledge of theory, and experience to the task at hand. But they seek to come to the table as equals, challenging the usual hierarchical power relations in practice. There is an important insistence on social learning, on knowledge built and acquired by a mobilized group that builds actively on experiences and practices. Knowledge is co-produced through experience, instead of professionally garnered as it is with the rational model of planning. Still there is room—and necessity—to advance these ideas in practice through broader political engagement in the decision-making that shapes our cities.

We inherited this landscape, but we are around for the new ones being built constantly. We have ideas and visions of a better world, of micro and macro utopias. They are not crazy. They are certainly no crazier than the utopian vision upon which neoliberalism is predicated, wherein: “the law of the market is presumed to operate in the same way, and with essentially the same effects, no matter where it is unleashed, leading in turn to economic stability, convergence, and equilibrium.”(4) Is it any wonder that places applying the same oversimplified formula begin to look and feel the same? Those operating in the neoliberal tradition must work very hard to make their utopia look attainable. We have to work hard not to play into their hands—to reconstitute the frame within which we act, organize, and plan, even as we engage with it.

3) Ibid. p 584

Conclusion

The projects presented here offer a glimpse into a moment in time when multiple groups, temporary collectives and organizations were actively contesting the givens of daily life in Chicago. That work did not end when this publication was compiled, and the approaches here are presented to provide an introduction and history to ways of working that have continued even stronger today.

To get involved in work that is going on today in Chicago, check out online resources like Chicago IndyMedia (http://chicago.indymedia.org), and AREA Chicago Art/Research/Education/Activism (www.areachicago.org).

Resources and Further Reading

Public/Social/Collective Art
Mapping the Terrain by Susan Lacy
One Place After Another by Mi Won Kwon
Culture in Action by Mary Jane Jacob, Michael Brenson and Eva M. Olson
The Interventionists by Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette (ed.)
Collectivism After Modernism by Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (ed.)
Collective Creativity by What, How and for Whom? (ed.)
Justseeds.org
Visualresistance.org
Social Design Notes, Backspace.com/notes
Republican.net
Transform.eippc.net

Critical Urbanism
Criticalspatialpractice.blogspot.com
Spacing.ca
Infiltration.org
Americancity.org
Military Urbanism Subtopia.blogspot.com
Sarai.net
Making Their Own Plans by In The Field (ed.)

Activism/Political Theory
Tangent University U-tangente.org
Autonomeida.org
Sindominio.net/karakola/precarias.htm
Leftturn.org
Indymedia.org
Ephemeralweb.org
Noborder.org
Info.interactivist.net
Lutherblissett.net
We Are Everywhere by Notes from Nowhere Peoples Global Action, Agp.org
Greenpeppermagazine.org
Wumingfoundation.com
Situaciones.org
Euromovements.info

Huge Amazing Links Pages
Theoctobersurprise.org/eng/resources.html
Investigaccio.org/
Cactusnetwork.org.uk/inspiration.htm
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*Cover photo: “The Trash Ball” being rolled down Michigan Ave. “Magnificent Mile” by the group Men & Women for the Department of Space and Land Reclamation (April 2001).

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