

Chicago, IL, 2024, Philipp Groth: "The Future is built"

Urban landscapes are increasingly defined by the tension between preservation and development. At this intersection, the fate of existing structures is often dictated by economic imperatives that favor demolition over adaptation. The discourse surrounding gentrification underscores the necessity of reimagining how spaces can serve multifaceted purposes beyond their original designs. This practice not only repurposes underutilized buildings but also acts as a catalyst for social interaction. It fosters a sense of belonging and ownership among residents, artists, and community members, who collaborate to renegotiate these urban sites and thus challenges conventional narratives surrounding urban development. By reasserting the idea that tomorrow's cities are not built from scratch, but rather emerge through the social transformation of what already exists, the potential of merging the revolutionary ambition for systemic change and the evolutionary act of repair arises.

Cities are inherently dynamic spaces. They evolve in response to shifting social, economic, and environmental conditions. This evolution frequently frames redevelopment projects as symbols of progress. In many cases, they prioritize economic growth over cultural and social considerations, leading to the displacement of communities and the loss of architectural heritage such as the "Chicago Brick". The neighborhood of Pilsen exemplifies this tension. Historically a working-class, immigrant community, Pilsen has undergone significant gentrification in recent years. As developers eye its prime location near downtown Chicago, longstanding industrial, cultural and social networks face demolition. In the face of such transformations, artists and cultural practitioners have increasingly stepped in to critique and reimagine these processes, confronting this tension by creating a space for dialogue about what is gained and lost in the name of "progress". Instead of submitting to the narrative of inevitability that is often associated with urban development, they show the possibility of coexistence - where preservation and adaptation are not mutually exclusive.

Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates, whose practice frequently involves the repurposing of abandoned spaces in Chicago, underscores this duality. "Spaces carry the weight of history, but they also carry the potential for change," Gates notes. "It's about finding ways to honor the layers of a place while imagining what it could become." In projects like the Stony Island Arts Bank, Gates transforms neglected buildings into cultural institutions that serve the local community while preserving their historical essence. This practice of restoration has its origins in the recognition of damage or decay, which in turn encourages a critical reflection on the historical and material conditions surrounding a building's production, past uses, and future transformation. This reflective process is fundamentally a social one. Drawing upon urban planner Hardt-Walther Hämer's advocacy for "cautious urban regeneration" and the 1980s Berlin housing activists' practice of *Instandbesetzung*—a synthesis of maintenance (*Instandsetzung*) and squatting (*Besetzung*), this methodology foregrounds the ethical and practical dimensions of working within existing urban frameworks. Hämer further emphasizes the interplay between social responsibility and material conservation: "Only a project that alludes to the particular conditions of the neighborhood, uses the existing structures and is supported by its inhabitants will enable the belief in a better future for the endangered areas."

In contemporary art, public space gained prominence during the late 20th century as both a site and medium for artistic intervention. This shift was deeply rooted in the socio-political movements of the era. The civil rights campaigns, anti-war protests, and the burgeoning discourse of identity politics collectively sought to challenge entrenched systems of power. Urban spaces, with their accessibility and dynamism, became platforms for artists to reject the commercialization of art in traditional gallery settings. By democratizing access and fostering dialogue among diverse audiences, collectives such as "The Situationist International" and artists like Gordon Matta-Clark transformed the perception of art during that era. It shifted from a commodity to a communal experience, inviting spectators to actively participate rather than passively observe. Thereby, this transformation also repositioned artists and organizers as advocates for social change, with their work serving as both a critique of and a remedy for systemic issues. This reclaiming of agency extended beyond the symbolic realm to the tangible. In response to ecological degradation and social inequalities, artists appropriated tools – both literal and metaphorical – as instruments of repair and resistance. Japanese architect and activist Yoshiharu Tsukamoto underlines this ethos with his slogan "Tools to the people!". The "tool" in these regards, however, is not confined to physical implements. It also encompasses the frameworks of democratic governance and the mechanisms of power within spatial production. In industrialized systems dominated by state and corporate interests, individuals often find themselves stripped of the ability to intervene in or repair their own environments.

Consequently, socializing the means of production and democratizing governance at multiple scales becomes essential for enabling practices of repair that are both artistic and societal. This approach also imparts a new significance to the everyday care and maintenance of the building fabric. Routine cleaning of surfaces, ongoing upkeep efforts, and infrastructure repairs all prolong the life cycle of the built environment. From this perspective, it becomes clear that cleaning personnel and craftspeople play a critical role in the sustainable care of existing building stock, yet their role often goes unrecognized and their material knowledge about the built environment is underappreciated.

By placing these relationship dynamics at the center of the discussions around the future of public space, the collective renegotiation not only considers the cultural and material life of the city but also offers a model for rethinking the intertwined trajectories of capitalistic power dynamics, urban development and environmental stewardship.