COMMON \ EDGE

ESSAYS

Breaking the Dead Paradigm For Design Exhibitions

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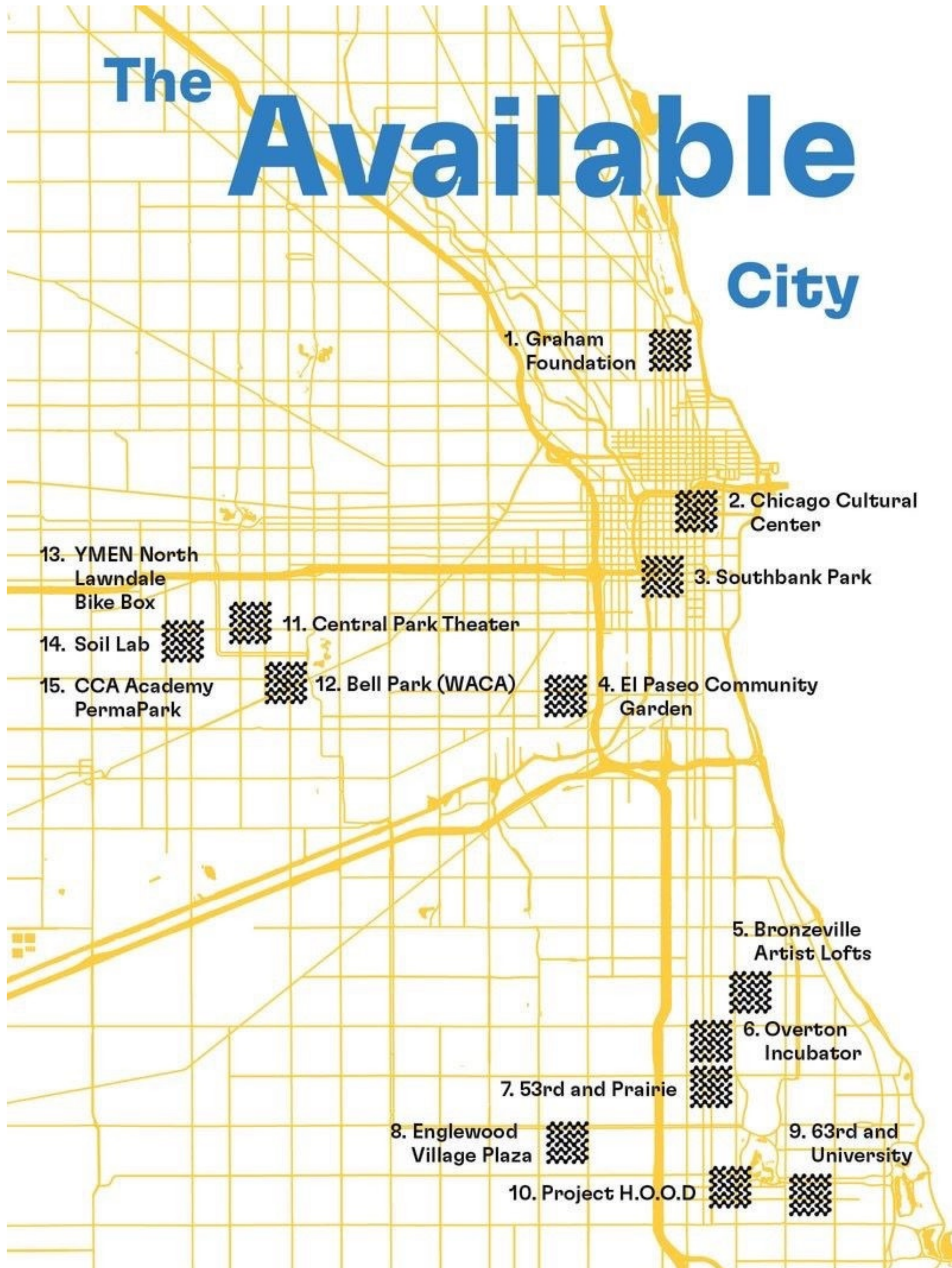
By Craig L. Wilkins

The problem with being a deliberative writer is that pretty much everything has already been penned by the time you're ready to write about something. Such is the case with the 2021 Chicago Architecture Biennial (CAB): *The Available City*. There have been several well-written, insightful essays about the CAB by Zach Mortice, Anjulie

Rao, Marianela D'Aprile, and others, so it would be foolish to travel the landscape they have so expertly traversed. Instead, I'm offering a trip through this edition of the CAB, which concluded a successful and significant run on Saturday, down a road less traveled.

So … biennials, right? Staged every two years, these events ostensibly perform as premier high-end art exhibitions. Curated primarily to showcase new trends, they are exceedingly influential in determining who and what are vital to follow in the art world. As such, biennials bestow significant, if not outsized, cultural and economic capital on the selected artists and their work. Of the more than 300 biennials now staged worldwide, the first, and perhaps the most prestigious, is La Biennale di Venezia, a preeminent art event first staged in 1895. By comparison, the first biennial in America was organized by Washington, D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1907, followed by New York's Whitney Museum in 1932. In 1980, the Venice Biennale added an architectural component. While more recent biennials include a category for architecture, the Tallinn, Lisbon, Shenzhen, Rotterdam, Oslo, New York, and Chicago biennials focus exclusively on it. The point here is not about biennials per se, but to point out that they are primarily concerned with the art object. Thus the architecture included in any biennial is considered by association, if not by definition, as an art object, the type displayed in the bastions of the culturally elite: galleries, institutions, and museums. Bastions like the Chicago Cultural Center, where previous biennials were held.

And that's a problem.



Themed *The Available City*, this year's Chicago Architecture Biennial was a radical departure from previous ones. Traditionally, the event is a formal exhibition held at the Cultural Center downtown. To address the issue of vacant, city-owned lots in Chicago's Black and Brown neighborhoods (there are 10,000 citywide, most of them in poor neighborhoods), artistic director David Brown paired architects with fifteen community organizations embedded primarily in neighborhoods on the city's South and West Sides, with the aim of repurposing these underutilized spaces. In the

spirit of "in the city" rather than "at the center" the scaled-down traditional wall exhibitions were held at the Graham Foundation's headquarters and an unused storefront at the Bronzeville Artist lofts.

While it's popular, and maybe even accurate, to claim that architecture is for everyone, such claims find less acceptance when it comes to cultural institutions. No matter their location, collections, and entry fees (if any), the cultural centers of the world are not welcoming to every person; not everyone is comfortable in these spaces. Entry to places of "high culture" comes with conditions and expectations on how to see, think, speak, and act, a set of signifiers often collectively understood as "good taste." Proper aesthetic discernment of objects in these spaces must be explained, taught, and, of course, practiced; indeed, one must have the benefit of education and time to master it. Thus the acquisition of good taste is a privilege to which not everyone has access. And there is less access to the tastemakers themselves—the museum directors, curators, critics, editors, agents, and academics. As for the possibility of becoming a tastemaker? That's for a chosen few. It's a type of cultural currency that's self referential, self-replicating, and exclusionary. Regardless of one's financial situation, good taste cannot be purchased. One might *earn* enough to acquire a Henry O. Tanner painting, but one must *learn* enough to appreciate it. The tastemakers create that knowledge, arguing that one must understand the context—the conflation of artist, peers, medium, technique, history, moment, labor, intent, etc.—to discern what is true and proper about the object. Their conviction is that they, and only they, have the requisite command of context to properly do justice to the object's import. From their perspective, any artistic knowledge created without this understanding (or their imprimatur) is not knowledge at all, but simply ill-informed opinion. There are no legitimate ways of knowing, seeing, or speaking about objects other than those created or controlled by the tastemakers. While this type of arbitrary, subjective authority is troublesome for art in all its forms, it is especially so when applied to architecture. The difficulty with this object-only narrative is that architecture's manifestation is fundamentally different from art in two significant ways.

The first is that for architecture, there is no object without a site, a place, a location, terra firma. The forces that make a site available for work are unique, exceedingly more complex than the other art production. Unlike a lump of clay, block of stone, empty canvas, or blank page, a site is rarely a true tabula rasa. Sites have histories—and, hopefully, futures. Despite the

tastemakers' unrelenting effort to position architecture as an aesthetic product only, the reality is that it cannot easily be divorced—intellectually, physically, or economically—from site. Of course, one can display a model, an image, or some other method of viewing architecture in an exhibition. Still, these are just replicas, facsimiles, not the actual objects, and certainly not the objects in context. While the recent Van Gogh immersive experience traveling the country is groundbreaking and boundary pushing in ways beyond the scope of this essay, it's not the same as experiencing the actual paintings. Whether ignored or acknowledged, the dissociation of object from location available to other art is not available to architecture.

The second is that, unlike other disciplines, architecture is burdened with the fact that someone other than the artist must pay for its manifestation, and what they're paying for is its practical use: what it does, its function. Of course, the production of art is no stranger to the realm of patrons and commissioned work, but for the creation of a home, office, hotel, hospital, museum, etc., architecture has a primary function that lies beyond the aesthetic. It must do and be something *more*. Yes, developers, companies, municipalities—and the general public for that matter—trade on the symbolic function of architecture: "We have the tallest this, the oldest that, the newest, shiniest, most breathtaking work of architecture in existence, and that's worth something." But that tallest, oldest, shiniest thing does not exist for its own sake; it's manifested for a purpose. Unlike a painting, sculpture, or novel, one does not generally own a building only because it's beautiful. Art can be produced without a patron and with no other thought than its own existence. Alas, architecture cannot. And this is why the 2021 edition of the CAB is so … something.

So radically something.

Having attended the CAB's opening weekend and made subsequent visits to its various sites, I've come to realize that to reintroduce, if not center, site and function, place, purpose, and people into the discussion of architecture as art—not simply as a background or stage for the production of objects, but as the very elements that define it—in a biennial of this magnitude is perhaps unprecedented. Any site made available for architecture has a "coming-into-being" story, one that's fundamentally part of the architectural object. How site becomes available for architecture is vital to the "true and proper" understanding of its object. That *The Available City* is co-created, shared, and subject to critique from the same audiences who'll both live with

and have a hand in its success or failure over time makes it more radical still. In many ways, “biennial” may be too small a word for what’s been staged in Chicago. This is a *continuous* biennial. The Chicago Architecture Decennial? Millennial, maybe? Cool? Hella. Accurate? Definitely. Illuminating? By far. Here’s why.

Englewood's Commons by Atelier Bow-Wow, led by Momoyo Kaijima and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, and created in collaboration with the Overton Incubator and Creative Grounds, Chicago Architecture Biennial, 2021.

By now, the positivist claim that urban conditions are simply the unfortunate outcome of progress and growth has been revealed to be largely inaccurate. A plethora of books, studies, and reports too numerous to mention have shown that rather than an unfortunate confluence of forces too arbitrary to predict, such conditions were wholly predictable and, in fact, orchestrated with the blessing and assistance of local, state, and federal agencies, as well as financial institutions, all of which have a deep and abiding economic interest in the growth of cities. They are sites of enormous capital accumulation and exchange because they concentrate more and more of our desire for work, income, social interaction, safety, leisure, educational opportunities. In other words, cities make money; maybe not so much for municipalities and the residents therein, but certainly for many types of financial and commercial interests.

Yet despite their voracious accumulation of interests, cities have strained to manage and provide for each adequately. In their rapaciousness, they have become victims of their own success. For the first time in human history, more people are now in urban areas than rural ones. This migration didn't happen overnight; it has been long in the making. Subsequent efforts to relieve the pressure on cities were the primary catalyst for suburbia's physical and symbolic construction, where homes were built (and immediately segregated), heavily subsidized by federal funds.

Further relief came from the interstate network of highways, frequently planned and built through existing poor and marginalized communities, to make getting to and from those new enclaves quick and painless. Finally, low-cost loans for home purchases were made available —except, of course, to the now-displaced Black and brown communities —regardless of income. These seemingly benign efforts contributed mightily to the conditions in cities today. According to the Urban Institute report *Worlds Apart: Inequality Between America's Most and Least Affluent Neighborhoods*, the nation's richest and poorest neighborhoods are separated by income, assets, and educational attainment more today than they were in 1960.

As we've matured as a country, more and more poor people have been concentrated with other poor people than ever before. Either isolated by

disinvestment or displaced by gentrification, that concentration has forced municipalities to focus on providing the most for those that can pay for its services. In an effort to keep property taxes within city borders, some places are rendered safe, pleasant, and livable. Others? Not so much. When complaints arise from distressed communities, the official municipal response is, "Well, we all have to share the burden." Cuts to public spending are couched in the cloak of crisis: "We've got to stop this (thing we've planned to happen)."

What is not said is, "And we'll do that, not by ending the policies we put in place, but by punishing those who cannot take advantage of them." Claims that "we have to tighten our belts" become more common, if not acceptable. Where the "three-card-monte, follow-the uneven-resource-allocation-if-you-can" public policy proves inadequate, indifferent, or ill equipped to keep the result from being blatantly clear, public spaces and services are sold to private interests as a way of maintaining municipalities' facade of responsibility to the public realm. While the veneer of common space and citizens' right to the city remain in place, in reality, residents have increasingly less access to the public realm. Technically, it's no longer public, regardless of how public it appears. Private, not civic, interests now determine who and what is public, in the public good, and even the very definition of "public" itself. In this scenario, places once accessible become less so. New spaces require permission to access. Permission comes with obedience. With obedience comes control. Soon, people simply police themselves. They don't try to move, speak, or act; they merely believe their life possibilities are predetermined by their environment and rarely challenge that assumption. They think, "What's the point?" The fact that the most significant single factor in determining life expectancy in America today is one's zip code should shock everyone except those in the medical and public health fields, from where such warnings continue to emanate.

This is not laissez-faire. This is intentional. All of these moves in the public realm signal one overarching theme: *Stay in your place, regardless of what it may mean to your health, education, economic and educational opportunities, or life expectancy. Yes, there may be lovely places in the city, but they're not for everyone. They're not for you. You don't contribute enough. You're not important enough.* It's an intentional strategy operating under cover of the free market that starves places of resources, demonizes those who complain, polices them to the point of discipline, and punishes those who rebel, all under the guise of progress. In the process it creates a place ripe for architecture, often in the form of gentrification. Capitalism indeed abhors a vacuum, and

when the ground has been cleared, the public is desperate, dissenters muted, and stragglers removed, sites are prepared for others to move into the hollowed-out carcasses of ravaged communities. These migrants bring with them the resources hoarded generations before. Talk of austerity disappears, and talk of investment begins. "We have to make these places whole again," the developers proclaim, and these places receive the resources previously denied long-suffering residents. New streets and lighting are installed, new amenities appear, new schools and businesses are built, all under the auspices of "reinvesting" in the city, ignoring (Columbus-like) the fact that people already live there, the fact that through their efforts the place remained viable. The result is that new residents and families benefit from the suffering of those deprived, while those deprived are moved elsewhere to be deprived some more. They rarely, if ever, reap the benefits of their agility, creativity, and resilience; and there are never any reparations for the theft.

The sanctioned inequitable distribution of resources and its concomitant benefits have created the landscape you see today. Vast swaths of cities are in survival mode. As Whitney Young Jr. said more than half a century ago, "[Architects] share the responsibility for the mess we are in. ... This didn't just happen. We didn't just suddenly get this situation. It was carefully planned." The problems of the poor are not because they're poor but because they are treated poorly, so poorly that they can only be poor. Squeezed until they pop like Baltimore or St. Louis or emptied out like Cleveland or Detroit, what has happened in cities is as much a result of the profession abdicating its responsibilities to the public realm as it is any other.

"Really?" you say, skeptical. "That's a pretty bold statement. How, exactly, do you figure that?"

OK, let's talk about that. Design shapes the very environment in which we live, helping mold us into particular types of people who act in particular ways. We manipulate, refine, and deploy space. We make it accessible or not, pleasing or not, egalitarian or not. We make it public, private, or somewhere in between simply by how it's organized, what it communicates, what it authorizes—and what it doesn't. Design prefigures material culture, shaping how people interact. The form of a family home, for example, is inseparable from the nature, constitution, and practice of family life. We can create a space so off-putting that no amount of signage and cajoling will ever make it welcoming despite its public intention. Alternatively, we can make it so inviting, engaging, and life-affirming that no barrier can keep anyone out

despite its private purpose. Design gives physical form to the ideological embodiment of a specific politic. Architects do this, and the best of us do it well. But, of course, we do not do this alone. Most often, we do this at the behest of others, with the assistance of others, and through the permission of others. Yet when our skills are employed in the shared landscape, ultimately, we—and we alone—must defend their use.

Sometimes, they are easy to defend.

Take Chicago's lakefront. No one would say the merchant princes and captains of industry like George Pullman, Cyrus McCormick, George Armour, Marshall Field, Montgomery Ward, Samuel Carson, and John Pirie were in any way the most egalitarian and socially progressive people of their time. Still, by regularly studying issues including juvenile delinquency, race relations, and old-age pensions, they understood the power of space to elevate lives. So they made it their business to save the Chicago waterfront for public use, understanding the public to be just about everyone and that everyone needed space to live. The lakefront, now one of the most spectacular things about Chicago, could have just as easily become a port, commercial wharf, or ceded to the railroads, all of which were discussed and, at various times, enthusiastically pressed. To show that such a vision made sense, to make clear what the lakefront and city could be, they turned to Daniel Burnham, who, in creating the master plan of Chicago that won the day, declared, "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood." Here, the politics of civic beauty and social unity are, if a bit imperial, undoubtedly clear. And we can enjoy the benefits of that vision and subsequent effort on any visit to the city, free of charge.

Sometimes, of course, they are not so easy to defend.

The politics of Robert Moses is plain to see but difficult to support. The form of New York City and its relationship to its adjacent municipalities is clear enough. Moses understood the power of space and place. For years he wielded unquestioned authority to shape the city and, in turn, New Yorkers themselves, and he wasn't exactly shy about using it. His vision of the city and the public realm was less than egalitarian. Indeed, there were those for whom space would be a given and others for whom it would be a premium. The idea of an equitable distribution of resources was, well, understood differently in Moses' New York, and architects, as champions of the built environment —intentionally or not—helped make his ideological vision a physical reality.

As Young also made so very clear in his historic AIA convention address, "thunderous silence" is also a choice.

If what I'm writing makes you feel uncomfortable, it shouldn't. I'm not telling you anything you don't know or feel on some level. Access to space is the entrée to life opportunities and choices. *Space is life*. The best of us know this and act accordingly. "Accordingly" in the sense that as much as possible, we work to provide for the young and old, the tall and small, the wealthy and not so wealthy, the many different kinds of people for whom space is essential. In other words, everyone. The less of us, maybe not so much.

It is inarguable that across the nation's landscape, cities are both internally and externally separated by resource imbalances, atomized by both spatial and financial conditions, and kept that way through over policing, covert surveillance, hyper-incarceration, at-will development, and, let's be perfectly honest, civil, political, and professional cowardice. Urban environments large and small, flush and broke—all are pockmarked with spaces of prosperity and poverty. The worst simply have so many that despite their numbers, communities remain disconnected, unable to leverage even the smallest of things, united by their near-total irrelevance to forces that might be—should be—able to assist. It's not much of a debate that we're deeply implicated in the state of the urban environment as a profession. Not only have we been silent on the theft of resources, we've also been complicit in constructing barriers that keep those resources safely out of reach of those from whom it was taken. We've looked the other way in the former and pretended not to understand the latter. We've settled for a municipal—and to a great degree, a professional —acceptance of what urban geographer Rashad Shabazz calls "architectures of confinement."

This is the content that doesn't find purchase at the art world's biennials, the unheralded context that troubles the centrality of aesthetics as the end-all and be-all of architecture, the quiet part out loud.

The Garden Table by Studio Ossidiana, led by Alessandra Covini and Giovanni Bellotti, organized in coordination with El Paseo Community Garden and NeighborSpace, Chicago Architecture Biennial, 2021.

This coming-into-being narrative is indispensable to understanding and appreciating the works in *The Available City*, yet few critics have spent time considering it, and fewer still writing about it. At best, they've given it only cursory, perfunctory acknowledgment in their rush to return to the aesthetic footing with which they're comfortable. Like bread crumbs, their expedited journey is littered with comments like, "Well, does any of this work have any staying power? Is it going to change anything? Is it going to move the needle?" Viable questions all, worthy of any architecture biennial, but infrequently raised in traditional institutions for fear of revealing an embarrassing lack of good taste. In those halls, to suggest the power, if not purpose, of architecture, is anything other than its aesthetic manifestation is to appear the fool. Such queries are not proffered because there is no need to return to a place one never left.

Historically, most biennials feature large architectures that speak to small issues. That is not the case with the 2021 CAB. Quite the opposite; it features small architectures that speak to big issues. Here, who gets to speak authoritatively about context, form, meaning, appropriateness, usefulness, etc.—and on what grounds—is substantively (irrevocably?) inverted. And for a profession that has difficulty connecting to the general public—most of whom view it as neutral at best or a harbinger of unconsulted change at worst—that inversion is decentering in all the best ways. Albert Einstein is reported to have said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." *The Available City* is a proposition challenging "the same kind of thinking" about architecture. It demands a reconsideration of the act, purpose, and objects of architecture; how we talk about them, and most important, with whom we talk about them. To extend Einstein, traditional tastemakers are not equipped to define these "art objects." To use their own justification, they don't grasp the context. That is unfortunate, as they've had the time and resources to do so. They simply lack the desire.

In his 2014 AIA Gold Medal acceptance speech, Shigeru Ban remarked on what has been a truism for over two decades: a new social and ethical imperative is at work in the field of architecture, one that will ultimately lead to an expansion of design into the areas of social, economic, and environmental justice. It's a method of practice that embraces the tenants of capitalism while turning its deleterious effects against itself. Seven years later, the 2021 CAB has taken this organic trend and made it a concrete opportunity for designers, the public, and the city. If it has shown us nothing else, *The Available City* has demonstrated that through a deep, egalitarian collaboration, architects can help create alternatives to how sites become available; that communities can maintain and develop assets of their own as well as link with others going through a similar process, ultimately becoming better able to withstand capital when it finds each attractive again—or, better yet, attract it on their own terms. Citizens can demand better conditions rather than capitulate to poor ones. The participating architects have shown us ways to engage resource-starved communities and help alleviate their hunger by co-creating scenarios of sustenance, countering the folly of the traditional tastemakers' definition of the architecture object. And in the space of that folly, a different kind of tastemaker emerges, one whose authority derives from lived experience, from everyday life, from not an abstract but an intimate command of context.

The critical concerns of this group of tastemakers are immediate

and urgent, more about the object of architecture than the architecture object, more concerned with visible ethics than visual aesthetics. For them, if one helps a community envision a better future, one has practiced architecture. If one has educated the public on issues related to design, one has practiced architecture. If one has participated in rewriting codes that assist in the construction of something prohibited but essential, one has practiced architecture. This shift is incredibly significant, worthy not only of a biennial but also of inclusion in the study, practice, and production of architecture, period. I'm sure many might find this unsettling, if not blasphemous. But these are precisely the types of conversations that should arise from any architecture biennial. Too many miss the opportunity to do so, to take on the challenge bell hooks left for us: "*Beloved community is not formed by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world*."

The art of architecture is a tool: how we use it depends on what we want. By expanding—or troubling, if you prefer—the tastemakers, including their command of context, *The Available City* gets it right. And right in a way that should be kept alive in future CAB editions and emulated by others. It's a grand gift to the city, to the profession, to everyone. One that's not guaranteed to be presented again anytime soon, certainly not at this scale. So get out into the city and visit the sites while you can. Take someone. Talk about it. Think about it. Argue about it. It's a gift worthy of Chicago. I hope all who engage it can see that. I know I do.

Featured image: Central Park Theater by Manuel Herz Architects. The project evokes memories of the buildings that stood near the Central Park Theater in North Lawndale, which is currently being restored. A pattern based on floor plans and sections of the lost buildings has been painted across the facade. The project was done in collaboration with the Central Park Theater Restoration Committee. All photos by Nathan Keay.

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