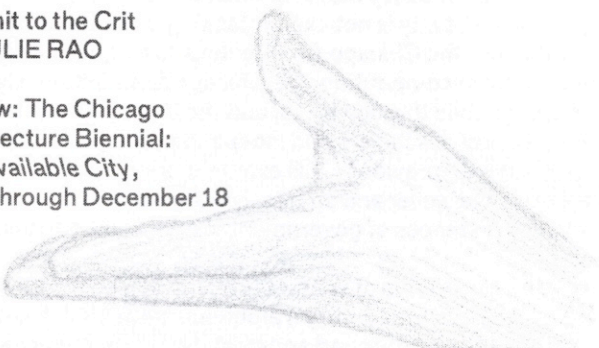


same efficiency that real-estate developers and bureaucrats displace people. DaCosta's film isn't hopeful about Candyman's mission of vengeance ever being understood as a corrective to injustice. But his lethal hook-hand is perfectly shaped to drag down a developer's bottom line. ●

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## Commit to the Crit ANJULIE RAO

Review: The Chicago  
Architecture Biennial:  
The Available City,  
open through December 18



Earlier this summer, the City of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development announced that it had formed a Committee on Design from a volunteer coterie of architects, developers, and academics, who will collectively assess development proposals. The initiative had the veneer of a boring legislative body, and yet I was startled as I scanned the list of members. The architect Jeanne Gang stood out, as did a trio of artists: Nick Cave, Theaster Gates, and there at the bottom, Amanda Williams.

To me, the move represents a bureaucratization of those with good ideas—with skills and tools and connections to communities and critical practices. Actors who typically work outside municipal-institutional confines, have, in a sense, become the institution; their ideas, tools, critique thus risk becoming corporatized. When the city decides, as it did last year, to implode an aging coal stack in a Latinx neighborhood in the middle of a respiratory pandemic, or provides, as it just may, the final operating permit to a recycling facility notorious for skirting already dismal emissions standards, will this committee take it to task? And if not the committee, then whom?

This is the role that Chicago Architecture Biennial (CAB) has the potential to take up for itself. The event's latest iteration, *The Available City*, connects internationally renowned architects with nonprofit, grassroots organizations working to resolve critical issues within the city's most disinvested areas. By and large, these pairings have proved fruitful, yielding numerous installations—mostly social or recreational structures—in vacant lots scattered across the West and South Sides. Director David Brown's approach represents a shift away from the concerns of previous editions, which revolved around the Chicago Cultural Center in the Loop. Yet the work itself toes the line of cross-disciplinary paradigm and flavor-of-the-week pandering to a climate where social justice is getting its due.

CAB's first outing, *The State of the Art of Architecture*, riffed on Stanley Tigerman's 1977 conference of the same name. Locally, Tigerman's reputation as a curmudgeon was only outweighed by his skill in organizing designers of all stripes toward productive ends—namely, the cultivation of critical discourse and the staging of alt-exhibitions. The insularity of the Chicago Seven and the Chicago Architectural Club, which Tigerman helped found, is well-known and for that reason, the two groups form a striking contrast to his other brainchild, *Archeworks*.

Tigerman and collaborator Eva Maddox spoke of *Archeworks* in experimental terms, a place where practitioners could step away from the economic drivers that dominated their working lives and collaborate with academics and non-design professionals. Along the way, they could rediscover all that architecture can contribute to the public good. As most grassroots organizations do, it went through periods of flux. And then in 2017, *Archeworks* suddenly stopped working. I can't say it shuttered, because that doesn't feel true; it simply vanished, leaving behind a vacancy that is difficult to fill.

On paper, the city is not exactly lacking in architecture organizations—the Chicago Architectural Club still operates an annual design competition; the Chicago Architecture Center engages the public through tours; and the Graham Foundation funds international scholars and independent projects. But none of these spaces—previous CAB exhibitions included—are conducive to the clever and aggressive questioning necessary for exposing instances of government negligence, overreach, and violence.

Absent these kinds of spaces, Chicago can no longer sustain its claim as the country's architectural capital. Inclusive, critical civic discourse around architecture is happening here, but it is undernourished and undersupplied. Earlier this year, the *Tribune* axed its architecture critic position, culminating a series of retreats from the region by national, New York-based design publications; into this lacuna rush real estate developers and their ever-optimistic narratives of city improvement. What is needed is a robust platform for open dialogue emphasizing values of social justice and inclusivity.

*The Available City*, through its generous vision of social remediation, hopes to quietly transform CAB into such a platform. Past editions, particularly 2017's *Make New History*, were slammed for being overly inward-looking, with exhibitions that sucked the air from the public's lungs and left little room for Chicagoans to discuss just how deeply the built environment has fucked up their health and their ability to live in an affordable apartment or safely access transit options.

No one could suck the air out of a room like former Chicago mayor Rahm Emmanuel, whose administration birthed a biennial exhibition series that, while well-funded (by oil companies), seemed to shut the door on meaningful dialogue. Emmanuel was the very public face of CAB and its first two editions. *The Available City*, meanwhile, saw very little of his successor, Mayor Lori Lightfoot, whose presence on opening day was limited to a pre-taped address. Perhaps she plans to pull back on the city's support and let Rahm's legacy project fend for itself. Through the Committee on Design, she may have found a more effective way to win the city's architectural "influencers" over to her side—all the better, I suppose. If CAB can find a way to expand on the model established by Brown, if it can continue advancing the work of those architects and non-architects who are already contributing to community organizing around justice in the built environment, we can let the bureaucrats keep their kill. Through critique we create an accountability of our own, hopefully one more durable than the legalistic kind. It's up to CAB to decide where it goes from here. Will it be an institution of critique, or will it lose its nerve, retreating into arcane disciplinary games whose effect—to borrow a satirical phrase of Tigerman's—is "to increase the distance between a cognoscenti and the perceptions (and values) of a generally unwashed public"? Let's hope for the former. ●

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