

9 Principles of Ethical Redevelopment

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Place Lab, part of the University of Chicago's Arts + Public Life initiative, is working on an evolving set of principles drawn from artist-led, neighborhood-based development work in Chicago's South Side. By introducing Ethical Redevelopment principles in their early stages of development, it is our intention for the content to be shared and refined collaboratively with other willing urban practitioners who also believe in spatial equity for cities.

Through June 2017, Place Lab is running a series of convenings and workshops to tease out the process and values of mindful city building. The presentations, conversations, and content generated will be shared publically online and through a publication. We want to make the case for Ethical Redevelopment and hope that you join in the discussion and apply it to the places you care about.

This document is a work in progress and should not be construed as complete nor directive.

Visit placelab.uchicago.edu/ethical-redevelopment for social media links, a discussion forum [activation to come], and information on the Ethical Redevelopment event series.

9 Principles of Ethical Redevelopment

1. Repurpose + Re-propose
2. Engaged Participation
3. Pedagogical Moments
4. The Indeterminate
5. Design
6. Place Over Time
7. Stack, Leverage + Access
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Introduction

Beginning in March 2015, case studies interviews were conducted with various members of Chicago-based, artist Theaster Gates' ecosystem—a diverse group of artists, art collectors, arts administrators, community leaders, funders, staff, personal, and professional associates. These interviews were designed to be semi-structured, allowing for natural conversation and unregulated responses from participants. The roster of questions asked in the case study interviews explored distinct themes of Gates' work.

Interviews were organized according to seven themes: approach to work, vision and philosophy, ambition (scale, scope, pace), opportunities and challenges, outcomes and impact, funding, and project or program logistics. Drawing from the National Endowment for the Arts "Project Showcase" categories, Place Lab interviewers prompted participants to address Gates' individual leadership style as well as how his programs interact with communities and partners throughout Chicago and other cities where work takes place. Additionally, questions covered a wide-ranging scale, from the day-to-day logistical operations of programs to the more general vision and philosophy of Ethical Redevelopment. Finally, participants were asked to address the opportunities and challenges particular to Gates' work, leading to insights for future improvements as well as feedback on what has been effective so far.

Working Definition of Ethical Redevelopment

Ethical Urban Impact
Thoughtful Cultural Critique
Insertions, Making Heat Para-Institutional(ity) Investment
-Theaster Gates

Shifting the value system from conventional financial and development practices to conscientious interventions in the urban context.

-Place Lab Team

1. Repurpose + Re-propose

Concepts: possibility, transgression

Take stock of what is around you. Use what you have or what is available at the time. If a thing is discarded because it no longer has value or use to its previous owner, accept and receive it. Make it work for you. Compel yourself to have a deep engagement with discarded things. Make resources work for you in new and unintended ways. Repurposing is an act of redemption, an act of imagination. Artistry is alchemy—it allows one thing to become another. Be an alchemist in your community. In new hands, there is renewed possibility for the discarded and overlooked.

This includes people as well as materials. If you know people, involve them. Who is around you and how are they valuable? How does repurposing objects live alongside the rehabilitation or reclamation of people? How can your work become a pipeline for training individuals who others have given up on? Repurpose with new purpose. People, property, and materials can be remixed and reimagined if you re-propose a new use. This, in effect, becomes a transgressive act by replacing allegiance to profit-as-motivator and allows for other considerations to drive the creation of place. Objects and projects do not have to be monetized to be useful.

As examples: An abandoned bank can reopen as a collections and cultural center with highly ambitious programs and exhibitions, set against the backdrop of a stunningly designed, refurbished building ([Stony Island Arts Bank](#)). A neighbor can be a programmer (a resident next to [Dorchester Projects](#) is on the [Black Cinema House](#) Advisory Board). The window from one building can live again as the walls/partitions of another ([BING Art Books](#)). A defunct currency exchange, a financial center for patrons who do not use traditional banks, can be repurposed into a well designed café that serves food both indigenous and foreign to local populations, encouraging a different kind of exchange ([Currency Exchange Café](#)). This approach to city- or community-building is about resource availability and smart design—start with what you have and recognize existing local assets and latent value in the discarded and overlooked.

2. Engaged Participation

Concepts: neighborliness, localism, access points

Invite others to get involved. Approach participants authentically as you would a neighbor. Work with the people who believe in the place: locals embedded by proximity, those connected by a desire to contribute or commitment to a mission. Provide multiple access points or ways to participate. Participation drives the transformation of a place and of those involved. Work as a resident and citizen to spur civic engagement, drawing a relationship between citizen participation and citizen power.

Ethical Redevelopment proposes developing an engagement framework that calls into question who does the work and with and for whom. As many organizations and institutions consider “engagement strategies” that may be more about informing a public—a one-way relationship—the willing investment of participants’ time, talents, and resources in a given place redefines the architectural, cultural, social, and economic landscape. By engaging with a multiplicity of people who share in the transparent negotiation and implementation of a vision, place-based work integrates a sense of social responsibility, neighborliness, and authenticity. Making changes to the physical and spiritual environment brings heat

and activity to a neighborhood for its own benefit: “The plan was never to get the people out of the neighborhood, but, instead, the plan was to figure out how to further engage people already there,” (Robert Rose, Executive Director, Cook County Land Bank Authority).

Cultivate and build upon neighborliness as a way of relating—an informal relationship, a cultural practice of reciprocity and interdependence. Engender intimacy by the familiar nature of programming: discussions, performances, interactions, and shared experiences. The value of the relationship is in the intimacy, not in the duration. Engage for as long as it makes sense to engage. This intimacy sparks commitment to a vision, and the neighbors, staff, and visitors become participatory producers—more than “consumers”—by tapping into different access points to find themselves in the work. The work is for many, with many, and, ultimately, by many.

3. Pedagogical Moments

Concepts: knowledge transfer, social responsibility

Moments of learning and teaching unfold in all aspects of work. Consider the steps in each project that could be instructive. By tapping into the existing, possibly latent talent within a community and putting it to use for the community, exchanges for transfer of knowledge reach across identities, roles, practices, disciplines, generations, and localities. Young people need opportunities to experiment, gain experience, and imagine their future. Adults, who are looking for new chances, benefit as well. Bring everyone along for the journey. Cultivate the talent they bring and foster new talent in work that excites them. Experience is the teacher; exposure is the lab.

Opportunities can be formalized by creating programming that fosters mentor/apprentice relationships, which allows work being done to function on several levels. For example, a gardener implements a community garden, which provides food for neighbors. A group of teenagers assist, learning both hard and soft skills that can be applied to their current and future lives, ranging from irrigation to teamwork to literal and figurative cultivation. A project hardly ever exists as one finite experience. Most circumstances can have revelatory moments, especially if knowledge transfer is part of the design.

Whether creating programs that capitalize upon existing talent or establishing workshops, training programs, and business accelerators, the ability to recognize moments for knowledge and skill sharing is a part of one’s social responsibility, effectively deepening the network of relationships within a community, its ecosystem, and the larger social economy. Without leveraging these structures and moments for pedagogical exchange, opportunities for teaching, learning, and cultivating talent are lost.

4. The Indeterminate

Concepts: Imagination, intuition, faith

Suspend knowing. Embrace uncertainty. Accept ambiguity. Allow the work to offer solutions; ask questions in response to “problems” facing a neighborhood or city. Resource inequity can be reduced with imagination.

The variable of the unknown is built into Ethical Redevelopment, into the programming and the acquisition of resources. Use faith and intuition to guide methodology, a process that's left undetermined, undefined, or slowly revealed, allowing for a fluidity, dynamism, and creativity that respond to developments in the moment and change direction as needed. Strictly profit-based entrepreneurs work to eliminate uncertainty, opting for careful strategizing and coordination to reach defined goals. Part of the unorthodoxy of Ethical Redevelopment is that while it is vision-driven, the route to achieve the vision is open ended. Believe in your project but resist believing there is only one path to achieve it. You can begin without a clear understanding of your end game—your intuition is just as powerful as a well designed strategic plan.

This open approach allows for opportunity—people, objects, and buildings present themselves. A more exacting or precise strategy could eliminate possibility and hamper imaginative uses or solutions to challenges. By operating in the realm of the indefinite, multiple questions are posed and reframed, and observation, imagination, and reworking enable ideas to be thoroughly wrestled. Interventions need time to gestate—work is not finite but durational, requiring time to develop a presence and either recalibrate, adapt, stay the course, or phase itself out. Leave room for the unexpected and unanticipated. It may be the best part of the work.

Mark Masuoka, Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer for the Akron Art Museum, elaborates on this point, “Theaster’s work is not giving you an answer. It’s asking you to experience...to take responsibility, to interpret the environment that you’re in...I think that is ultimately what people respond to.”

5. Design

Concepts: aesthetic, desirability

Everyone deserves to see and be a part of the transformation of their spaces into places. Beauty is a basic service often not extended to “forgotten parts” of the city. It is an amenity considered incongruent with certain places. Beautiful objects come from and belong in blighted spaces, just as they do in high investment areas of a city. Creative people can play a pivotal role in how this happens. Beauty has magnetism. It defines character. It promotes reverence. Design can enhance the desirability of a neglected site, corridor, or block while illustrating the reverence and care of a neighborhood and its residents. Aesthetics may speak loudly or whisper, but either way they draw people in. It provides value, respect, importance, and regard for the character of a community.

Design ignites and gets people reinvested in a place. These demands to a place become poetic demands. Accordingly, the political demands needed to wake up our cities also become poetic. Alterations to the built environment—tracts of vacant land or the long-abandoned, crumbling corner house—effect the psyche of a community. Residents become willing to do things because you have shifted how a place looks. Your design decisions change how space feels. Previously unengaged neighbors become willing to spend time in the invested place. It departs aesthetically from what is next door. The renovated structures exists for you and for them. Design can interrupt how people perceive themselves by changing the conditions of their daily activity. Young people look at the built environment and see the world as something worth critiquing, exploring, and constructing.

Demonstrating the beauty in what others disregard or diminish creates a powerful contradiction. Design informs the spirit and the use of a place. Design can recalibrate what a community comes to consider sacred and cherished while reinforcing the comfort or identity of home. Places thought to possess no beauty, no design integrity, have value. The ordinary, the left over, the material remains of a neighborhood's more prosperous times can be used in new ways to distinguish and attract. You do not have to create something from nothing. Something always remains.

Design is about content as much as it is about presentation. Design does not stop at creating the beautiful vessel. It extends to the creation of the contents—what happens in the building, what is offered, who assembles? Urban design thinking asks about the connections that could happen between one house and another, one neighbor and another.

6. Place Over Time

Concepts: flexibility, nimbleness, aggregation, anchor space

A sense of place cannot be developed overnight. Actions, interventions, site specific experiments, and investments need adequate time to be realized. Likewise, neglect, abandonment, and divestment of a place happen over time. Pockets of cities deteriorate gradually. Thus activation, density, and vibrancy require cultivation for an extended duration, not short, quick fixes. Place is more about the people who inhabit it and the activities they engage in than the space itself. To be an anchoring space in a city, people have to be willing to spend time there. Hot, hip spots come and go. Trendy locations fall short of connecting “need” with “space.” Need changes over time and, as a result, space has to change over time. Spaces have to be flexible and nimble. Place-based work is about the aggregation of years of activity and organic development of relationships. When it works, people visit and return in response to offerings that are authentic to the spirit of the place. Intentionality resonates. Visitors can shift from users to participants. They can become invested in the sustainability of the place and contribute to the quality of the experience. Participants come to rely on anchor spaces as consistent resources of cultural and spiritual sustenance.

7. Stack, Leverage + Access

Concepts: scaling up, strategy

An investment in yourself, in your ideas and projects sends a signal to those watching your work. It is critical to have skin in the game, to have something at stake even if the investment is sweat equity. Making change requires conviction and commitment utilizing belief, brainpower, energy, time, and dogged perseverance. Projects like these require belief and motivation more than they require funding. Whether an intervention is a single project, location, or gesture, it has impact and reverberation. Early small success can enable the next project. Leverage the attention garnered by the work to amplify it. Let the work attract more believers. A good idea is as crucial as establishing relationships with funders, gaining access to multiple spheres of influence, and incorporating expertise. Turn interest and excitement into investment. Resource streams should be diverse, stacked, and bundled to meet the price tags of your projects.

Over time, a project from your initial days of engagement and experimentation can mature. Something that you passionately believed in, but had little external backing for, can grow in scale and scope to become a sophisticated version that many stakeholders support and believe in. Demonstrating capacity permits access to greater resources. Proof of infrastructure is persuasive.

8. Constellations

Concepts: ecosystem, diverse entities

Charismatic leaders are ineffective without teams. Both are strengthened by the presence of the other. Complementary skills and practices advance work. Collaboration allows for some of the best work to emerge from a process. Teams benefit from careful curation and exchanges across specialty. Projects need visionaries, believers, implementers, collaborators, and evaluators. A vibrant constellation or a rich ecosystem is responsive to the pairings and groupings that suddenly emerge. Some webs of connectivity mature more slowly, gradually revealing formerly unforeseen affinities. A project taps into a particular kind of power when it refuses to be singular, when it takes up space and assembles believers from disparate corners.

9. Platforms

Concepts: the thing that makes the thing, hang time

Regardless of regional circumstance, many of our cities suffer the same challenges—neglect, population loss, and abandoned buildings that defy the limits of the neighborhood’s imagination. Often, the proffered solution is singular. But one building, individual, or program cannot reroute a neighborhood’s trajectory. A community needs a platform: a foundation that creates new social possibilities, a structure that incubates new economic or artistic prospects. A platform is a mechanism to propel work forward—it creates conditions of multiplicity, compounds ideas, expands relationships, germinates opportunities, and widens access. A stage or platform is often invisible. It operates not in service of itself but to reinforce what can be.

A just city is required to facilitate platforms that engage those who do not understand their power and feel cheated out of the right to publicly demonstrate their power. Don’t just create the thing, create the thing that makes the thing. Platform building means developing opportunities for people to gather and commune. The event—what is happening—is beside the point. The point is that folks are meeting, exchanging, and learning. Create intentional hang time. It builds bonds, which build community. A space that encourages deep conversation, new friendships, and, ultimately, a community of people who want to be a part of transformative work in the neighborhood. A space where like-minded folk can come and say, “What else can be done? What can I do 10 blocks away from my block? How do I share what I love to do with others?”

References

The following articles give context and information about Theaster Gates and his work.

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About Place Lab

Place Lab is a team of professionals from the diverse fields of law, urban planning, architecture, design, social work, arts administration, and gender and cultural studies. The think tank is a partnership between [Arts + Public Life](#), an initiative of [UChicago Arts](#), and the [Harris School of Public Policy](#). Led by renowned artist and University of Chicago faculty member Theaster Gates, this joint enterprise merges Chicago Harris' Cultural Policy Center's commitment to cultural policy and evidence-based analysis with Place Lab's work at Arts + Public Life on arts- and culture-led neighborhood transformation.

Over the course of three years, the team works to document and demonstrate urban ethical redevelopment strategies initiated through arts and culture. Place Lab is based in Chicago, extending much of the team's project management, design, programming, real estate, community building, and documentation acumen towards advancing arts and culture place-based projects on the mid-South Side of Chicago.

Place Lab observes the spaces that Gates reimagines, supports their programmatic activation, captures methods, and shares findings with the partnering demonstration cities of Gary, Akron, Detroit, and other Knight Communities. This work situates artists and creatives in conversations about the urban context. To effectuate policy change, Place Lab amplifies artistic innovators as civic leaders. In order for cities to develop in mindful and equitable ways, artists must be integrated into shaping neighborhoods and public spaces. <http://placelab.uchicago.edu> placelab@uchicago.edu