

# We Built The City's Future (Already)

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**U**rban landscapes are shaped by a constant negotiation between preservation and development, where economic imperatives often prioritize demolition over adaptation. Yet, embedded within existing structures are histories, communities, and cultural identities that challenge the notion that progress necessitates erasure. Rather than viewing urban change as an inevitable force, it is essential to reimagine spaces as sites of continuous transformation—where social, cultural, and material legacies intersect with contemporary needs. The discourse on gentrification underscores the urgency of this perspective, highlighting the potential of repurposing underutilized buildings not just as a practical necessity but as a means of fostering collective belonging. Artists, community organizers, and residents play a crucial role in renegotiating these spaces, ensuring that cities are not built from scratch but evolve through layered social transformations. By bridging the revolutionary ambition for systemic change with the evolutionary act of repair, a more sustainable and inclusive urban future emerges.

Cities are dynamic, shaped by shifting social, economic, and environmental forces. However, the dominant narrative of urban progress has often been tied to large-scale redevelopment projects that privilege financial gain over cultural continuity, leading to displacement and the loss of architectural heritage. In Chicago, this is evident in the neighborhood of Pilsen, historically a working-class immigrant enclave that has faced relentless gentrification. As developers target its proximity to downtown, long-standing social networks and industrial sites face erasure. Yet, amid these transformations, artists and cultural practitioners intervene—not merely as critics but as active participants in reshaping the urban landscape. By reclaiming space and creating platforms for dialogue, they challenge the assumption that preservation and adaptation are mutually exclusive. Instead, they demonstrate the possibility of coexistence, where honoring history and embracing new uses can go hand in hand.

Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates has been at the forefront of this conversation, transforming abandoned spaces into sites of cultural production and community engagement. “Spaces carry the weight of history, but they also carry the potential for change,” Gates asserts. His projects, such as the Stony Island Arts Bank, illustrate how neglected buildings can be reimaged as cultural institutions that serve both local residents and broader publics. This practice of restoration acknowledges damage and decay as starting points for reflection rather than justification for removal. By engaging in what German urban planner Hardt-Waltherr Hämer termed “cautious urban regeneration”—a methodology that integrates social responsibility with material conservation—these interventions offer a counterpoint to the top-down development models that dominate contemporary city planning. Similarly, the Berlin housing activists of the 1980s pioneered *Instandbesetzung*, a synthesis of maintenance (*Instandsetzung*) and squatting (*Besetzung*), emphasizing the ethical and practical dimensions of working within existing urban frameworks. As Hämer noted, “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.”

Public space, long a contested site, became a crucial medium for artistic intervention in the late 20th century, driven by the socio-political movements of the era. The civil rights struggles, anti-war protests, and the rise of identity politics all sought to challenge entrenched power structures. In this context, artists moved beyond traditional gallery settings, reclaiming urban spaces to democratize access and foster collective engagement. Groups like the Situationist International and artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark reshaped the perception of art from a market commodity to a communal experience, emphasizing participation over passive observation. This shift repositioned artists and organizers as agents of social change, whose work functioned both as a critique of systemic inequalities and as a means of repair and resistance.

The idea of repair extends beyond metaphor to tangible acts of care within the built environment. In response to ecological degradation and widening social disparities, artists and activists have embraced tools—both literal and conceptual—as instruments of resistance. Japanese architect Yoshiharu Tsukamoto’s slogan, “Tools to the people!” captures this ethos, advocating for a democratization of spatial production. Yet, tools are not limited to physical implements; they also encompass the structures of governance and power that shape urban life. Within industrialized systems dominated by state and corporate interests, individuals often find themselves stripped of agency over their environments. Reclaiming this agency necessitates not only political advocacy but also a reevaluation of maintenance and upkeep as radical acts.

The labor of sustaining urban spaces—cleaning surfaces, repairing infrastructure, and preserving buildings—is often rendered invisible, despite its critical role in the longevity of the built environment. The undervaluation of custodians, craftspeople, and caretakers reflects broader systemic biases that privilege newness over continuity. Yet, their expertise holds profound knowledge about material resilience and adaptive reuse, offering alternative models for sustainability that extend beyond technological innovation. Recognizing these forms of labor as integral to urban stewardship challenges the notion that the future of cities is solely determined by large-scale architectural interventions. Instead, it positions care and maintenance as fundamental to the social and material life of the city.

By centering these dynamics in discussions about public space, a more nuanced approach to urban development emerges—one that moves beyond simplistic binaries of progress versus preservation. The collective renegotiation of space is not merely a cultural exercise but a model for rethinking the intertwined forces of capitalist power, community agency, and environmental responsibility. In doing so, it opens up possibilities for more equitable, participatory, and enduring forms of urban transformation.