

the quilt of community

massive change in action

by sarah tranum



Google Earth, Sarah Tranum

The quilts created by the women of Gee's Bend, Alabama, are unlike any others. What makes them unique are their abstract patterns: a mix of fabrics, shapes, and colors that are beautifully chaotic and, at the same, time succinctly methodical. These art pieces, sewn by African American women throughout four generations, maintain an underlying order that upholds their structure and quality and still allows for improvisation and rhythm in the work, producing authentic, beautiful results. The Gee's Bend quilts offer a lesson in design that is not limited to textiles, but can also inform large-scale urban planning.

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It is a lesson that became clearer to me as a participant in the recent *In the Spirit of Massive Change* design charrette held in Chicago, Illinois in November of 2006. The charrette was a four-day event that paired six Toronto representatives, all graduate students at the Institute without Boundaries, with six architecture and landscape architecture students in Chicago, to develop design ideas for Garfield Park, a priority neighborhood in Chicago's west end. The event was sponsored by the Design Exchange, the City of Toronto's Economic Development, Culture and Tourism Division and the Chicago Sister Cities International Program. Coinciding with the *Massive Change: The Future of Global Design* exhibit at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art and the *Massive Change and the City: Global Visionaries Symposium*, the charrette was an opportunity to apply the ideals of Massive Change to a real scenario. Launched in 2004 as a traveling exhibit and published book, the *Massive Change Project*¹ explores the potential of multi-disciplinary design to generate meaningful solutions to global problems. Using these concepts provided a framework to better understand and envision how to create change in a challenging neighbourhood such as Garfield Park. The charrette began with a tour of the park and a presentation by a community leader who gave a thorough description of the strengths and weaknesses of the area.

Garfield Park has many assets: a legacy of civil rights activism led by Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960's, a beautiful park and renowned botanical garden, wide boulevards and stately houses, and a network of churches, community groups and block clubs deeply invested in the health of the neighborhood. On the other hand, the neighborhood lacks cultural and economic diversity (98% of the population

is African American and 68% is living on an annual household income of less than \$35,000 USD), there is a high rate of unemployment, and crime levels have prompted 24-hour police surveillance cameras to be installed on the sidewalks. In the areas around Garfield Park, speculative buying and loft development has priced the residents of these communities out of their homes. There is a legitimate fear that Garfield Park could soon experience the same level of gentrification. Within the neighborhood, there are hundreds of vacant lots dotting the neighborhood, including an empty 1,000,000 square foot industrial building that was formerly Brach's Candy factory.

When my Chicago partner and I began to plot out the vacant lots over an aerial photograph of Garfield Park, we saw a quilt emerge. This quilt of concrete, wood, grass and trees revealed a distinct order and symmetry. The holes in the community's fabric were plentiful sitting silent like shadows of the houses and stores that once stood when the neighborhood's density was much higher and its Main Street thrived. Here was an opportunity to "stitch" the lots together, reconnecting residential areas to the business district and schools to the parks. For us, the stitches were a way to build onto what was already in the community. We began to see the potential for design to reconnect, create movement and ultimately redirect the flow of people, commerce, money and activity to build a stronger, more vibrant Garfield Park.

Proposing measures like flexible zoning, cooperative landownership and access to business capital, our goal was to use holistic design to bring informal enterprises into the formal marketplace, keep property in the hands of the community instead

of the developers, and create youth employment and training opportunities. We saw our design as an underlying framework that would allow residents and businesses to plant steady roots in the neighborhood. The rest would be up to them to determine.

What might have started as a charrette with the goal of designing physical structures or architectural solutions resulted in work that was much broader and less rigid. The designers in the other five groups also built upon the assets of Garfield Park with proposals to turn vacant lots into income-generating garden spaces, empty houses into business incubators, and children into agents for change. We, as emerging designers, demonstrated that we were not afraid to cross disciplines to search for solutions. By looking to economics, urban ecology, sociology, and history, and by remaining astutely aware that we should not design onto the community but with the community, our work examined the complex origins of poverty. Collectively,

we proposed designs that would catalyze opportunity for ownership and progress so that the community itself would have the tools and resources necessary to determine the future of Garfield Park.

This is the lesson of the Gee's Bend quilts for the future of design: to provide a solid framework from which improvisation and adaptation can occur, further improving the design in ways that could never be planned nor imagined. As designers, we can build from the knowledge and vibrancy that exists to create change and offer opportunity for others to create and inspire change. This is how the ideals of *Massive Change* are put into action and meaningful transformation evolves within communities. ■

1. "The Massive Change Project explores the legacy and potential, the promise and power of design in improving the welfare of humanity. It originated as a collaboration between Bruce Mau Design and the Institute without Boundaries." www.massivechange.com



Intersection in the commercial district of West Garfield Park, Chicago

Heidi Nelson