



GATHERING SPACES

***A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR ART
& CULTURE CENTERED URBAN
GREEN SPACE DESIGN***

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COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS



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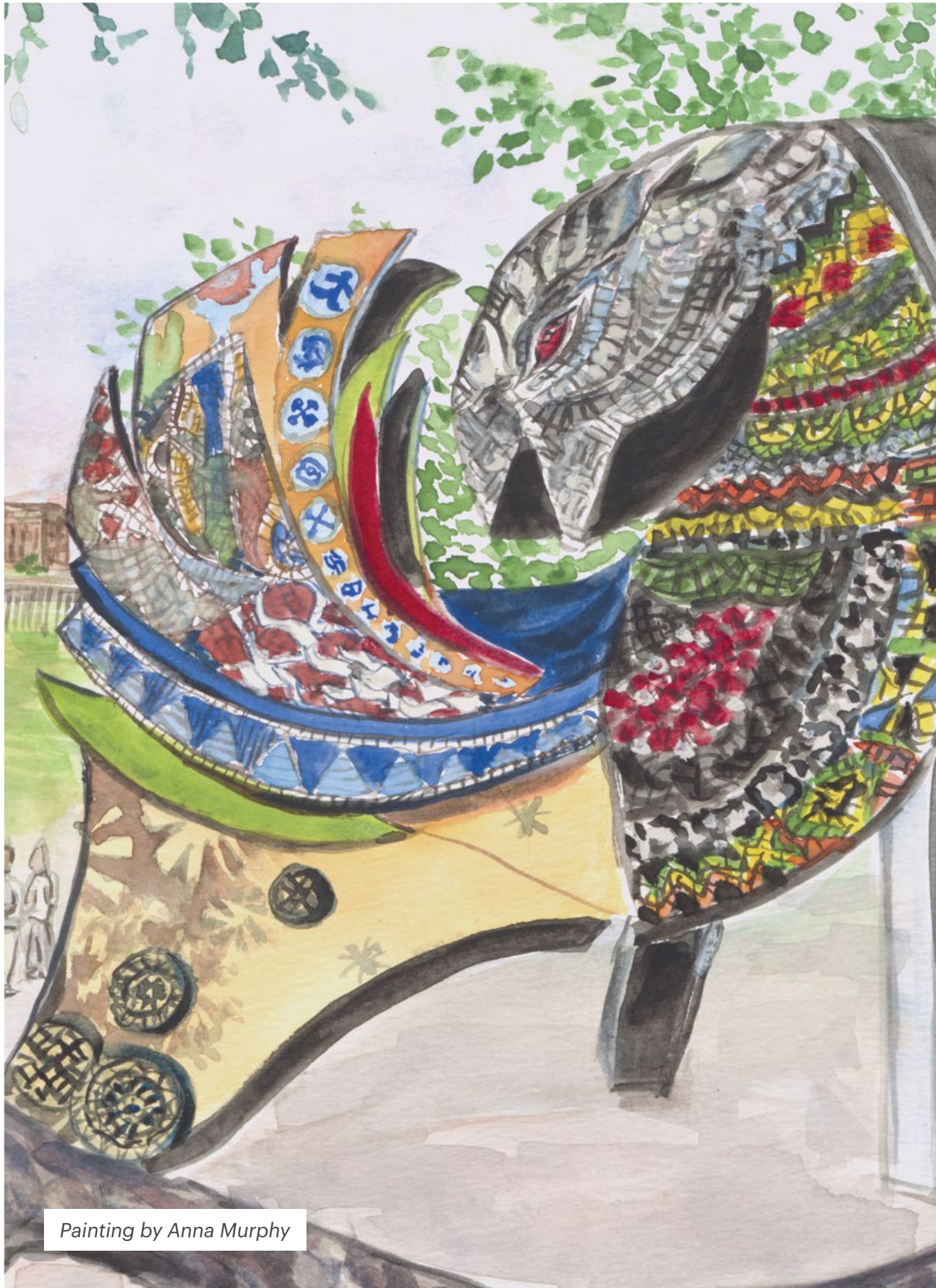
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Painting by Anna Murphy

PREFACE

Most peoples of the world honor nature: it inspires, calms, teaches, fosters concern and care, opens doors to the divine, and connects us to the earth.

Powerful nature transforms and also provides tranquility. As an artist, nature also inspires me. In Africa, there is a symbol called the *sankofa*, which is represented by a bird looking backward over its tail. Its meaning is “Go back and fetch it.” This represents the understanding that our pasts hold important information to move us forward in this life. In the Burnham Wildlife Corridor, like the *sankofa* bird, we go back to fetch it and bring forth our connections to nature and our culture for the sake of the earth’s continuum, and our future. We do this for our community: to raise consciousness of maintaining a healthy, strong, and balanced environment for people and our non-human kin. We carry this spirit into this guide. **We want this guide to be an invitation to all to take on this work, this stewardship, to make whole places for people. As you read, we hope that you, too, will be moved, and encouraged, to be an instigator of this mission in your community.**

— Arlene Crawford, Artist, Sankofa for the Earth Gathering Space



Land Acknowledgement

The city now named Chicago was home to Potawatomi people who were forcibly removed from their land. Menominee, Myaamia, Ho-Chunk, Kiikaapoi, Ojibwe, Odawa, and Peoria people also had deep ties to the region. The authors acknowledge that we are guests on this land and offer respect to the many Native American people living today in Chicago.



SECTION 1:

INTRODUCTION

THE MOMENT

Urban green space design is at a turning point, in Chicago and nationally.

In recent years, a confluence of issues and interests has deepened the significance of ecologically healthy green spaces in cities for the benefit of humans and non-humans alike. Climate change and biodiversity loss have led land managers to redouble efforts to make cities healthy for nature and wildlife. At the same time, community activists and leaders in historically segregated and disinvested neighborhoods have advanced movements for environmental justice and equitable access to quality natural spaces for the well-being of their residents. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the ways urban nature yields benefits for improving mental and physical health, sustaining cultural



traditions, and connecting communities to the earth and to each other. Too often, policymakers and scientists have framed the targets of

urban environmental conservation and human quality of life as separate concerns. But cities are complex, dynamic systems where human and ecological well-

being are interrelated. New opportunities exist for a broader set of stakeholders to shape what urban biodiversity conservation looks like and how it generates benefits especially for under-resourced communities. In order to create socially just and environmentally sustainable cities, consideration of language, art, and culture need to be part of the decision-making process about the creation and function of public green spaces. There is a growing sense that when artists and cultural workers with these forms of expertise and community connections are empowered as key collaborators, nearby

neighborhoods develop a deeper, more beneficial relationship with natural area projects.

The experience of COVID-19 in American cities has reinforced the necessity of equitable urban green space access, and often deepened the connections residents have with the nature nearest to them.

Funders and land management agencies have responded to the need for better community-connected green spaces by prioritizing programs and resources that address related issues.

Artists working with community-based organizations are uniquely situated to seize this opportunity to play more central roles in increasing access to, and shaping the visitor experience of, parks and natural areas. Environmental agencies acknowledge that new ways are needed to ensure that historically marginalized communities have decision-making authority in urban green spaces and can connect to the land in culturally specific ways. Artists partnering with community leaders can be catalysts for change in both these physical spaces and formal community engagement processes.



PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

We wrote this guide for practitioners working to seize this moment for innovative green space design in cities.

We hope to inspire creative action that integrates social and environmental objectives in urban park planning. Drawing upon the Burnham Wildlife Corridor (BWC) Gathering Spaces example, we highlight the power of public art to help realize underrepresented communities’ priorities for parks by weaving their language, symbols and cultural ties to the land into the user experience of these areas. We show that this deliberate integration of nature, art and culture leads to more equitable urban green spaces and to important relationship building across social sectors. We want to inspire and support others with similar goals, and to learn from each other as a community of practice.

Our intention is for this guide to be a catalyst for future initiatives that employ artists, creatives and community leaders

to co-design and activate urban green spaces in culturally relevant ways for nearby residents. A related objective is to contribute to a COVID-19 pandemic recovery that builds in equitable access to the benefits of urban green space, particularly on Chicago’s south and west sides.

The Gathering Spaces model provides strategies for uplifting the unique ability of artists to establish and sustain cultural connections to natural areas.

This guide will be useful to those interested in supporting, developing, and/or activating culturally meaningful, artistic gathering spaces in natural, outdoor settings. The intended audience includes, but is not limited to, community-based organizations,

leaders and elected officials, block clubs and community garden groups, public artists and arts organizations, funders and philanthropists, land managers, government agencies, and environmental organizations. This guide lends insight into and shares lessons learned from an inclusive, collaborative approach to revitalizing an urban natural area.

The BWC Gathering Spaces serves as a model for use in other Chicago-based projects, as well as those farther afield. It can help municipalities deliver on capital and federal grant obligations, but, more substantively, help them to build trust and street-credibility in neighborhoods and communities of color where these agencies and institutions work. The BWC Gathering Spaces offer new examples for practice and policy. They showcase the

value in modifying current public art, community/civic engagement, and land management policies that may have formerly been overly top-down and bureaucratic. As described by the Chicago Park District’s Manager of Natural Resource Conservation, in this case, land management planning changed to include community vision and authentic voice.

In this guide, we discuss the administrative process of creating the BWC Gathering Spaces. Then, for each of the five spaces,

we describe the concept, design, and construction of the central art installation and examples of the programming that has activated the sites. We then outline lessons learned, and highlight places where the Gathering Spaces idea has informed other projects in the City. We conclude with specific guidance and resources for those interested in drawing upon this model.

A website that complements this print publication can be found here:



gatheringspaces.org

Additional photos and video of the BWC Gathering Spaces are available, along with maps and field guides to help explore this area of Chicago’s south lakefront. Practitioners can also download templates and resources useful for community-based public art projects in green spaces — from conception to curation, installation, and sustained activation.





SECTION 2:

THE BURNHAM WILDLIFE CORRIDOR GATHERING SPACES

BACKGROUND



The Burnham Wildlife Corridor is a 100-acre ribbon of urban wilderness running through one of Chicago’s premier lakefront properties, Burnham Park.

The BWC is one of the Chicago Park District’s largest lakefront natural areas and is representative of the native prairie, savanna and woodland ecosystems of this region. Roots & Routes is an initiative aimed at co-creating and sustaining the BWC, in order to support native plants, wildlife and nearby communities. Project partners collaborate based upon a shared commitment to improving the quality of

life for residents through strengthening their culturally relevant connections to vital green spaces. The Roots & Routes collective includes large institutions such as the Chicago Park District (CPD), Field Museum and The Nature Conservancy, as well as artists and many community-based organizations serving the predominantly Black, Latinx, and Chinese-American neighborhoods close to the BWC.

Physical and social barriers have historically limited access for residents of these communities to Chicago’s south lakefront where the BWC is located, and to quality natural areas more broadly.

In fact, all partner communities have endured a host of injustices commonly experienced in highly segregated American cities. Now illegal methods like restrictive covenants and redlining starved communities of credit and housing opportunity. Economic development and upward mobility in Chinatown and Bronzeville

were constrained for generations, and the effects of these racist policies are still being felt. The other primary Roots & Routes partner communities, Pilsen and Little Village, have the lowest per capita green space in the city. In 2012, grassroots organizers secured a major environmental justice victory when pressure over health concerns led to the shuttering of a coal-fired power plant sited in the neighborhood. Roots & Routes collaborators have confronted these legacies while working to establish pathways and deeper relationships to the BWC that improve the health and resilience of local

residents and the natural area.

The Field Museum sits near the northern end of the BWC and has an abiding interest in ensuring that conservation writ large in Chicago reflects the diverse values and priorities of its residents. Staff from the museum’s [Keller Science Action Center](#) drew upon prior research and connections through established networks to convene partners from the Pilsen, Little Village, Bronzeville and Chinatown neighborhoods in order to help build a new framework for the co-design and stewardship of this emergent landscape.



Locations of the Gathering Spaces along the BWC



Sankofa for the Earth



In Africa, a bird looking backwards over its tail represents the Sankofa symbol, which means “go back and fetch it.” It is an understanding that our past(s) holds important information to move us forward in life. A mosaic on the exterior of the bird and mural on the interior represent Bronzeville history. QR codes are integrated into the mural to access information about the images.



Lead artists: Arlene Turner Crawford, Dorian Sylvain, Raymond A. Thomas
 Master Carpenters: BK Ellison, Kendal Glover
 Community Partner: South Side Community Art Center, www.sscartcenter.org

Set in Stone



This project, which is an interpretation of a traditional Chinese “scholar’s rock,” includes a sculpture that represents the ravages and beauty of nature. A scholar’s rock invites visitors to acquire wisdom through meditation, perhaps while sitting on one of the site’s two benches made from ash trees damaged by the emerald ash borer.



Lead artists: Andy Bellomo, Anna Murphy
 Community Partner: Chinese-American Museum of Chicago, www.ccamuseum.org

Bronzewood



This new space was created by the Chicago Park District and features modern, geometric features for seating and reflection in the shaded woodland near Oakwood Blvd. It was inspired by the woven willow sculptural forms and mission of *Sounding Bronzeville*, the previous Gathering Space. *Bronzewood* boasts robust oak sculptures that, like *Sounding Bronzeville*, commemorate the resilience and strength of the African-Americans that migrated north and now call the Bronzeville community home.

La Ronda Parakata



La Ronda refers to the circular structure of the space and *Parakata* means butterfly in Purépecha (an indigenous language from the state of Michoacán). The butterflies in this sculpture are simultaneously headed toward the sky and bound to the earth, symbolic of the migratory pattern of monarch butterflies that parallels the Latino immigrant experience in Chicago.



Lead artists: Héctor Duarte, Alfonso “Piloto” Nieves Ruiz
 Community Partner: Casa Michoacán, www.fedecmiusa.com

Caracol



Drawing on rich connections from the natural world and cultural symbolism, *Caracol* (“snail” and “shell” in Spanish) represents the immigrant’s desire to belong while maintaining the core of memory and identity. Snails perform a critical role in the food chain; likewise, the immigrant’s economic and cultural contributions enrich and revitalize the host society.



Lead Artists: Georgina Valverde, Diana Solís, José Terrazas
 Community Partner: Contratiempo, www.contratiempo.net



For more information about your Chicago Park District visit chicagoparkdistrict.com or call 312.742.PLAY (7529) or 312.747.2001 (TTY)
 City of Chicago, Lori Lightfoot, Mayor | Chicago Park District Board of Commissioners

The Field Museum and the Chicago Park District gratefully acknowledge the following partners for their support of programs in the Burnham Wildlife Corridor:



The CPD and Field Museum staff that support Roots & Routes have committed to being responsive and reflective. They determined to listen carefully to community partners, to integrate new voices in decision-making processes, and to challenge assumptions or biases that are found to undermine shared objectives. Trust has improved through the process of including the language, art and traditions of community stakeholders into natural area visitor experience design and management planning. Large institutional partners have been encouraged to

critically reflect upon what scholars such as Jason Byrne and Myron Floyd call the prevalence of the “white gaze” in natural area and protected land signage, outreach and stewardship programming in the U.S. Roots & Routes partners have built upon what their constituents in communities of color identify with in a public natural area, what causes them to return, and what inspires a sense of ownership.

In 2015, Roots & Routes initiated a project in which artists and designers partnered with community organizations to build

gathering spaces in the BWC. CPD agreed to use part of its capital budget for the natural area to support community-based teams to design and fabricate five unique installations for the south lakefront. Field Museum and Park District staff convened a volunteer Curatorial Committee made up of artists and local leaders that issued a request for proposals, judged submissions, and assisted in oversight and implementation of the selected projects. The five chosen Gathering Space designs integrate culturally resonant environmental themes put forward by

participating artists and community organizations with the ecological story of this changing landscape. These designs were inspired by traditions that honor ancestral connections to the land. Since then, the artists

and partners have brought their Gathering Spaces to life with multi-lingual programming through the Roots & Routes initiative including dance, poetry and musical performances, cultural festivals, story

circles, and art workshops. The Gathering Spaces have become vital sites for community engagement, cross-cultural exchange and wellness in the outdoors.

The Roots & Routes Mission:

Serve a network of Chicago partners committed to enhancing connections to the natural world through art, culture and care for the land. We bring people together across generations and communities through shared experiences grounded in respect and reciprocity. We create spaces for exchanging stories of resilience that inspire actions for racial and environmental justice. Roots & Routes is building Bronzeville, Chinatown, Pilsen and Little Village neighborhood ties to the lakefront, deepening a sense of belonging residents feel in the Burnham Wildlife Corridor. We bring nature and culture together through projects that celebrate and sustain life. Our work creates opportunities for youth who will become the next generation of caretakers of land and community.



PROCESS

The timeline for the BWC Gathering Spaces, from concept to opening celebration, spanned from late 2014 into the summer of 2016.

Listed below, in chronological order, are some of the key steps in the process.



1 Developing the idea

CPD needed to install seating along the BWC to provide resting spots for visitors. Building on the momentum of two early and successful Roots & Routes stewardship events at the BWC, both with significant local community involvement, the decision was made to take a more inclusive and creative approach to providing places for people to sit rather than simply installing benches. The idea

arose that “gathering spaces,” which would serve the practical purpose of providing places for either rest, convening, education, or celebration, would also present a special opportunity to better connect local communities to the BWC through artistic and cultural connections to nature.



2 Site selection and landowner approval

CPD vetted the potential Gathering Spaces locations, indicated simply as seating areas in a BWC landscape plan, with Field Museum and other partners and determined that they were appropriately spaced and situated, and that an area of disturbance 30 feet in diameter was acceptable within the natural areas.



3 Determining an administrative structure

In order to distance the large institutions leading this effort (and, in this case, the funder, which was CPD) from any process associated with the selection of who would create the Gathering Spaces, it was decided that a Curatorial Committee comprised of arts and community professionals outside of those organizations would be recruited to help develop requests for proposals (RFP) and submission evaluation rubrics. The makeup of the Curatorial Committee reflected the ethnic and cultural diversity of the partner communities; each Curatorial Committee member was offered a stipend of \$300 for their participation. Together, the Curatorial Committee and the administrative partners determined that a three-part evaluative process would work best for this effort: pre-proposals (all welcome to apply), full proposals (invited), and in-person interviews (invited).



gatheringspaces.org/tools



4 Defining the application process

Given that this would be the first time semi-permanent artistic installations would be located in a natural area, CPD defined clear parameters around acceptable environmental impacts. Guidelines and restrictions were also set forth, including the use of natural or recycled materials as well as a prohibition on the use of concrete, cement, or any electrified feature (e.g., lighting). CPD also specified that designs must ensure that installations could not be used as shelter.



5 Marketing the opportunity

The institutional partners and the Curatorial Committee hosted two informational sessions — one in the Pilsen/

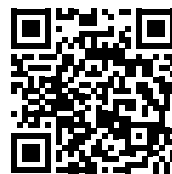
Little Village community and one in the Bronzeville community — to advertise the BWC Gathering Spaces opportunity and provide a forum for explanation of the concept and subsequent questions. It was also thought that these sessions might be good venues for matchmaking between artists and community groups, since the Request For Proposals required such a partnership. The institutional partners also led tours of the Gathering Space locations and accompanied interested artists to a warehouse of concrete elements of former municipal projects being offered by the City’s Department of Cultural and Special Events.

full proposals, the group invited a select group of applicant teams for in-person interviews. After the interviews, the Curatorial Committee made its final decisions.



7 Awarding funds

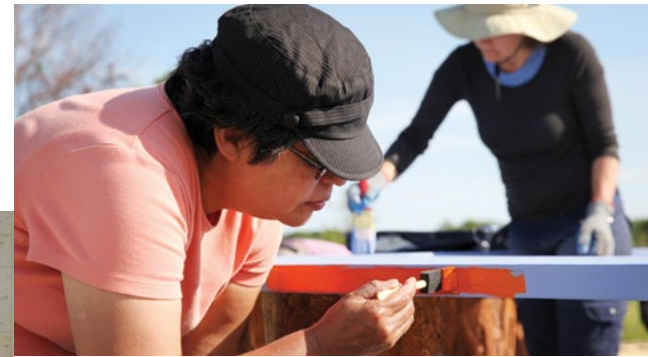
The selected teams of artists and community-based organizations were awarded \$20,000 each to design, fabricate, and install their Gathering Spaces. Soon after the winning teams were announced, the institutional partners organized a potluck dinner so that all of the artists and organizations could meet each other and share their visions for these innovative installations. CPD established agreements with each of the teams so they could receive capital funds; teams were also required to have liability insurance to cover them during the on-site installation process.



gatheringspaces.org/tools

6 Evaluating submissions

All applicants submitted pre-proposals, the format of which was collaboratively designed by the institutional partners and the Curatorial Committee. Pre-proposals were reviewed and a number of applicants were invited to submit full proposals. The submission package for full proposals included a signed Memorandum of Understanding between the artists and the community organization comprising each team, as well as a site plan rendering and a detailed budget. Upon reviewing



8 Documenting design and construction

The institutional partners hired a professional photographer and a videographer/filmmaker to document the process of creating the BWC Gathering Spaces. The photographer produced a book of images for each Gathering Space, and the filmmaker created a 10-minute video including images and interviews spanning the process. Additionally, the partners visited the artists in their studios and at their Gathering Space locations to observe and check in on progress.

“The BWC Gathering Spaces could be seen as a pilot for what can be done on a larger scale to include artists and communities in the city and its public spaces.

Chicago is a city of communities and its public spaces have the potential to reflect those communities through the arts and culture. This project can teach us to think more broadly of what is possible when the city and artist’s work together to promote the beauty of our communities.”

— Henry Cervantes, teacher and traditional dancer and Curatorial Committee member



9 Unveiling the installations

Approximately 10 months after the winning teams were first announced, a large-scale, orchestrated celebration took place to officially open the BWC Gathering Spaces to the public. It was a day filled with speeches, music, food, dance, theatrical performances, processions, reverence, joy, and appreciation. Celebrants were encouraged to visit all five spaces after an opening ceremony at the south end of the BWC, and there were customized celebrations at each location.

TEAMS AND THEIR SPACES

Untitled

*Home is not a quiet place
home is with me
in my heart
on my back
it travels with me
across land and time
heavy like my journey
protecting me from the elements
from predators
until I reach my destination
My destination isn't home
my home is with me
We leave home each day
only to miss it and return
but not me
One can't miss home
if home is always within
There's no hurry
no appointments to meet
I travel at the speed of life
because my life is my home
and my home is on my back*

— Luis Tubens

Written in a workshop organized by Caracol and Contratiempo in the summer of 2021.



Memory of the BWC Gathering Spaces opening celebration.
Painting by Anna Murphy

Caracol



Team

Lead artists:
Georgina Valverde,
Diana Solís
and José Terrazas

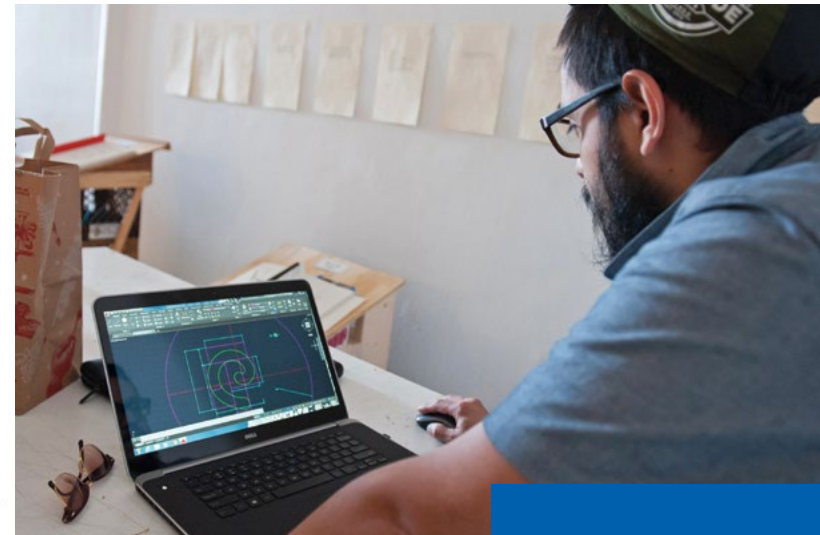
Community-based Organization:
Contratiempo

Design and Installation

Nestled amidst the prairie in the Burnham Wildlife Corridor at 26th Street and the Lakefront, *Caracol* ("snail" in Spanish) is a delightful space to stumble upon for visitors exploring the trails off the bike path.

Caracol was inspired by the humble mollusk, an animal that carries its home on its back, a metaphor that resonates with the immigrant experience of carrying one's memories, historical past, and cultural legacy to a new context. The team also drew from Mesoamerican culture

and the logarithmic spiral, a shape that occurs abundantly in nature, from galaxies to our DNA. In the Mexica (Aztec) civilization, the spiral is associated with Quetzalcóatl, the deity of wind, the arts, crafts and knowledge. One of Quetzalcóatl's attributes is the ehecacozcatl or



"wind breastplate," a talisman made of conch shell cut crosswise to reveal the logarithmic spiral.

Located seven miles directly east of Little Village ("La Villita"), the largest Mexican and Mexican American neighborhood in Chicago, *Caracol* represents a place

The spiral-shaped table was built with marine plywood and serves as a surface for changing "murals" by local artists. The seating stools and hopscotch are made from salvaged materials provided by CPD.

where Chicago's immigrant community can experience a sense of belonging, removed from the hustle and bustle of the city, while still being part of it. *Caracol's* visual and performance components support the mission of its artist team's partner organization, *Contratiempo*, a dynamic and multi-faceted non-profit that promotes and highlights the cultural contributions of the Spanish-speaking population of the United States.



Caracol's defining feature is a spiral-shaped table; the conceptual linchpin of the design — a logarithmic spiral that grows outward towards the city on the west and Lake Michigan to the east, and manifests the artist team's original aspiration to create a flexible space that could function as an outdoor classroom, gallery, performance space, as well as a relaxation spot along the BWC. Installed along the spiral, as it unfurls outward, are a set of stools and a small path made of tree trunk sections, a hopscotch game embedded in the



ground and carved with the dots and bars used in the Mesoamerican number system, a small stage, and finally an ample bench that hugs half the perimeter of the 30 foot diameter site.

Caracol's flexible and multidisciplinary programmatic

components reflect the heterogeneity of its design team composed of Diana Solís and Georgina Valverde, both established Chicago artists with strong teaching backgrounds; José Terrazas, a sculptor with experience in manufacturing, computer



Caracol has been programmed by various community groups including Contratiempo, the Society of Smallness, Son Chiquitos and Northerly Island Park. It is a favorite location for meetings of CPD staff.

aided design (CAD) and landscaping; and Moira Pujols, a former dancer and linguist who was at the administrative helm of Contratiempo until 2020. Pujols and Valverde also bring extensive programming and arts administration experience. Muralist Luis Muñoz, who participated in the early stages of the project, contributed to the conception of the site as a community gallery on



the Lakefront. The team worked with landscape architect Terry Guen, who led a charette to help sharpen the design focus and assigned Guanyi Gao to help refine initial ideas and produce the technical drawings for construction.

In reflecting on the success of the project, Pujols stated, “Foremost in my mind is always the multitalented, committed, knowledgeable group of artists that contributed well beyond what could have been expected initially. In particular, the early decision to have Georgina guide the creative process so that we could engage deeply in

the concept and meaning of *Caracol* and delve into our relationship to the land as immigrants, gave the project a clear direction and heart. Once built, the activation became an extension of Contratiempo programming, which I see as only strengthening in the future, as the project matures.”

Site Activation

During the summer months, *Caracol* becomes an outdoor classroom for CPD nature programs and is often used by Son Chiquitos, an organization established by families, teachers and artists

to foster educational programs that strengthen children’s Spanish language development and cultural identity through music, art and literature. Local poets and folk bands, such as Son Monarca and A Flor de Piel, and classical guitarist Iván Resendiz have graced the stage.

Community support was essential to building and installing *Caracol*. Dozens of volunteers donated their time and energy to help clear the plot, dig holes, transport material, and install the components. As Solís points out, “I am surprised by how much solidarity emerged among not just the crew but

others from the community who came out to help and support the creation and activation of our space and the other spaces.”

Community engagement is an outcome of the Gathering Spaces model of pairing artists with community-based organizations to conceive and design public art. This model is mutually beneficial: artists can enrich their practice by responding and giving shape to genuine community needs and concerns and communities gain a sense of ownership that encourages participation at all levels, from site maintenance to programming. Nevertheless, managing and coordinating continued programming and stewardship has been an ongoing struggle. Pujols, who put together the initial team, notes, “The major challenge was the budget, which was not realistic. A significant amount of

work, in particular the project management, ended up being performed on a volunteer basis.”

Almost every other year since its inception, *Caracol*’s table surface has featured new designs by selected Chicago-based artists. A poetry workshop led by Contratiempo poet and board member, Miguel Marzana, resulted in *Caracoleando* (“snailing”), a bilingual publication of poems inspired by snails and the BWC. The CPD supports annual programming through small allocations, but procuring and administering other necessary funding sources, in addition to managing initiatives, require the dedicated time of a team member, which has often fallen on Pujols and Valverde.

Challenges aside, Marzana, points out the benefits of a project that invites multidisciplinary collaboration, “It’s a more

productive way to work and creates a lot of feedback within the project. It opens up a potential that goes beyond the ideas of individual artists.”

An additional benefit of the Gathering Spaces has emerged during the pandemic. Marzana states, “*Caracol* is a physical space that one can visit, not just see in photographs in a Google search or a web page. As a physical space, it supports an ongoing artistic initiative that allows for annual programming and a place where the community can gather.” Adds Marzana, “It makes me happy to see people from other communities there, too. It’s a testament to the goal of the project to have people come together in a natural area that is also within the city.”

Set in Stone



Team

Lead artists:

Anna Murphy, Andy Bellomo, and Jan Claibourne (bench maker)

Community-based Organization:

Chinese-American Museum of Chicago



Design and Installation

Inspired by traditional *gongshi* (Chinese: 供石), also known as “scholars” or “spirit” rocks, *Set in Stone*, a sculpture resembling *gongshi*, is nestled in a

serene enclave of trees accessible via a parking lot off 31st Street west of Lake Shore Drive (approximately 4000 south).

“I did not know that such an urban area would have such a charming and remote natural space, like a hidden gem, just a short

walk from a busy highway. Our space was a beautiful opening with many mature trees surrounding it, with one tree in particular overhanging almost directly above our sculpture. I loved seeing the sculpture in all four seasons. It brought a

different feel to the piece, adding different colors, and backdrops at different times of the year.”

— Anna Murphy, lead artist

In Chinese culture, rocks have been admired for thousands of years for their aesthetic qualities and are an essential feature in gardens and

The artists visited the Field Museum to study examples of scholars rocks to develop their design.

landscaping. In the early Song dynasty (960-1279), scholars began to collect small, unusual rocks and brought them inside their studios for contemplation, hence the name “scholar’s rock.” *Set in Stone* features an 8-foot sculpture made of welded steel, foam, epoxy, and acrylic paint. It resembles the expressive natural rocks so prized in China, Korea and Japan. The “stone” of *Set in Stone* was fabricated to feature details such as crevices, rough textures, holes



and perforations that resemble the geological and weathering processes that shape actual rocks. The rocks embody these transformational effects and therefore are signs or reminders of the ever changing state of nature and the universe. This eroded and twisted shaped sculpture placed in the middle of a tranquil rock garden invites visitors to stop and contemplate nature and to appreciate its beauty and strength.

Set in Stone was designed and fabricated by lead artists Andy Bellomo and Anna Murphy working



in partnership with the Chinese American Museum of Chicago (CAMOC). Both artists have a strong background in public art and have each produced numerous murals in Chicago's Chinatown and beyond. CAMOC's mission is to advance the

appreciation of Chinese American culture through exhibitions, education, and research and to preserve the past, present, and future of Chinese Americans, primarily in the Midwest.



Set in Stone is enclosed by a mature canopy of native oak and hackberry trees.

“Many volunteers and community members came together to transform the space at Mid-Autumn Festival. Over the years, volunteers have made seed bombs, planted prairie plugs, and removed invasive species. When you visit Set in Stone, remember this place has been transformed by the hard work of a community.”

— Ted Gross, CPD Program Specialist

Site Activation

As with the other Gathering Spaces, *Set in Stone* is the result of intensive community involvement and participation. CAMOC has been a hub for community involvement in the BWC through the Roots & Routes initiative. Since 2016, CAMOC has staged its Mid-Autumn Festival at *Set in Stone*. The Mid-Autumn, or Moon Festival, is one of the most important traditions in Chinese culture, as significant as Christmas and Thanksgiving in the West. The festival falls on the 15th day of the 8th lunar month of the traditional Chinese calendar, coinciding with the harvest in mid-September to early October when the moon is at its fullest and brightest. At *Set in Stone*, the festival features community planting, storytelling, traditional Chinese acoustic music and dance, sky gazing with telescopes, lantern and rabbit mask making, tea and mooncake sampling, and a lantern parade.

“We believe the event can help promote the beauty and love of nature. The Mid-Autumn Festival is a celebration of the full autumn moon and the togetherness of people that allows participants to enjoy culturally appropriate programming, food, tea as well as the beauty of nature and the moon.”

— Ben Lau, CAMOC Executive Director

Menghua Guan, a Chinese *guzheng* (a Chinese plucked zither) player from China who performed for the first time at the Mid-Autumn Festival in 2021, commented on the unique opportunity of playing in a natural setting that also reflects a community’s traditional heritage:

“Playing under the moon doesn’t feel like playing in a chamber concert hall. Playing under the moon can make my mind more peaceful and relaxed, get closer to nature, and draw inspiration from nature.”

— Menghua Guan, musician

One Song

Multi Culture, together
as one
One love, one earth
A family we’ve become

Come as you are
This is your land to see
To dance, to run
To be all you can be

We make the rules
The laws of this heart
Our differences unite
They don’t set us apart

Let us shine together
Our strength is diverse
Brothers and sisters
Children of a one song
universe

— Anna Murphy



Inspired by the Chinese Dragon Dance at the Gathering Spaces opening celebration.
Painting by Anna Murphy

La Ronda Parakata



Team

Lead artists:

Hector Duarte and Alfonso “Piloto” Nieves Ruiz

Community-based Organization:

Casa Michoacán

Design and Installation

La Ronda Parakata offers a dramatic view of Lake Michigan and the Chicago skyline from its elevated location at 35th Street and the Lakefront. It sits on a small hilltop built from the debris that was excavated during the restoration of 31st Street



Beach. This topographic anomaly, in an otherwise flat landscape, is a fitting site for *La Ronda Parakata*, which was inspired by the monarch butterfly (*parakata* is butterfly in the Purepecha language), which yearly migrates to sanctuaries in the highlands of the Mexican state of Michoacán.

La Ronda Parakata features a set of large-scale butterfly outlines fashioned out of rebar and covered with willow saplings harvested from Chicago parks every other year in early spring. The butterfly shapes surround a circle measuring 30 feet in diameter with four points of access at each of



the cardinal directions, a reference that corresponds to scientific and mythological ideas of Mesoamerican culture. The openness of the butterfly wall allows a view of the outside while within the enclosure 20 trunks arranged around the perimeter reference the tonalmachiotl (Nahuatl for what we call the Aztec calendar) and invite visitors to sit and

La Ronda Parakata, was designed and fabricated in artist Hector Duarte’s Pilsen studio.

rest, appreciate the view, or assume a more meditative stance.

Designed by Hector Duarte (born in Michoacán) and Piloto Nieves Ruiz (born in Querétaro), *La Ronda Parakata* is a space of ritual and renewal for visitors to the BWC and, in particular, for the Mexican immigrant community in Chicago.

Duarte, a muralist trained at the David Alfaro Siqueiros Workshop, has long identified with the monarch butterfly, both as a native of Michoacán



and as an immigrant who made the long trek from his native Mexico to Chicago decades ago. Migration, as embodied by monarchs, also resonates with Piloto Nieves. Since his early twenties he has called Chicago home. Piloto is a self-taught artist who upcycles trash to create powerful sculptures that comment on our relationship with the environment. *La Ronda Parakata* is a synthesis of each artist's aesthetic sensibilities and concerns.

Design and construction of *La Ronda Parakata* posed special challenges



for the artists. The site is only accessible by foot and there were limitations to how the components could be installed within the BWC, a natural area where concrete is not allowed. To fabricate and install the large butterfly shapes, Duarte and Piloto relied

on generous support from the community. As Piloto recalls, "there was a man at Casa Michoacán who worked as a landscaper and he and others helped us dig holes. Many others helped to bend the rebar and cover it with bamboo" (a material that Duarte and Piloto used



Partners organize an annual Day of the Dead procession and celebration at La Ronda Parakata that draws residents from the nearby Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods.

initially before switching to willow saplings). To bend the rebar, the duo engineered a machine using truck brakes through which the rebar was fed and shaped.

Site Activation

Duarte and Piloto partnered with [Casa Michoacán](#), a service-oriented organization that represents the community

of Michoacán in Chicago and helps to organize a yearly Day of the Dead procession and ceremony at *La Ronda Parakata*. The ceremony, which includes music, ritual dancing, and prayers, has its roots in syncretic practices that emerged early in the 20th century, as Mexico attempted to reconcile the legacy and strong presence of indigenous cultures with its colonial past. This annual event is not the only time that people use *La Ronda Parakata* as a ceremonial space. Piloto recounts that he has visited the site and found remnants of offerings — like corn, fruits and flowers — or

encountered visitors deep in contemplation and prayer.

When it comes to public art, community engagement needs to be front and center, says Piloto:

“It’s important to listen to what people in the community want to say because they interact with the piece day in and day out.” When communities participate, adds Piloto, “it is powerful. They become part of the project and take on the responsibility of caring and protecting it.”



*Earth healing prayer at La Ronda Parakata during Gathering Spaces opening celebration.
Painting by Anna Murphy*

Sounding Bronzeville



Team

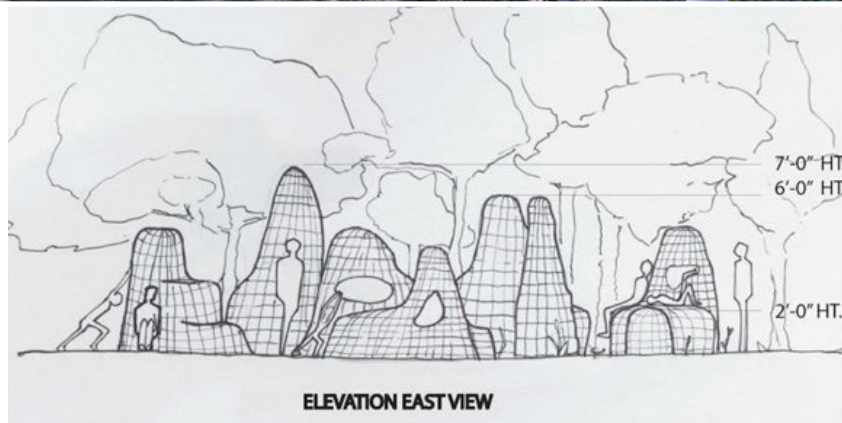
Lead artists:

Norman Teague and Fodayemi (Fo) Wilson

Community-based Organization:

Bronzeville Community Development Partnership

The primary partner was Paula Robinson of the [Bronzeville Community Development Partnership \(BCDP\)](#), a neighborhood advocate and leader for a variety of different engagements, organizations and events. When the RFP for the Gathering Spaces project was made public, Fo Wilson



and Norman Teague were eager to meet and discuss applying with Paula and her teammate Larissa Akinremi. Paula and Larissa were instrumental in developing programming and advertising the project across the city.

Design and Installation

According to Norman Teague, *Sounding Bronzeville* was “constructed out of willow strands that were weaved together vertically and horizontally as though

they were baskets woven into enormous and normal size resting structures. Willow branches are strong yet fragile, and as the artist, I had an interest in also understanding the outcomes of weather and wear and tear of the materials. Over time you could see the willow forms were inhabited

Sounding Bronzeville was named in part for the intention of capturing noises from lakefront wind passing through the portals in the willow structures.

over the winter by raccoons and other animals, which was expected. The damage that occurred to our space was based on timely wear and tear. The taller structures began to deteriorate after about 3 years.”

Norman offered advice to other practitioners, sharing: “In our active creating we used the steps of the design process which normally begins with listening closely to the community about



how the project would impact the neighborhood best. Afterwards the team followed up by including them in the process as much as possible. Schedule time so that you have enough rest but also plan to invite neighbors and have a space that is convenient for that community partner to participate as much as they can. This part of the process is the incentive that helps them become ambassadors of the space. Therefore, they are part and parcel of the programming that follows. Work out the best plan and stick to it.

Work with consultants like architects, or builders that you trust and can count on.”
With time, *Sounding Bronzeville* collapsed. Paula and the artists were offered two options: to repair it, or to bring the

installation to a close, and move on to other projects. Ultimately, they chose the latter, in part for the reasons Norman Teague describes above. The work had an ephemeral nature to it, and its collapse was a

fitting, even anticipated, end. Despite ending their involvement with the Gathering Space, their efforts have been deeply appreciated, and the work that went into *Sounding Bronzeville* has continued to inspire other efforts.

CPD’s Natural Areas crew members utilized their chainsaws and their creative talents to craft the boxy structures of the Bronzewood Gathering Space, which replaced Sounding Bronzeville.

Sounding Bronzeville’s conclusion ushered in an opportunity for another structure to be created to fill in the site. The space evolved into Bronzewood (coming from the ‘woods’ behind the community of Bronzeville). Initially, there was discussion of a new Request for Proposals, and finding a new partner for the space. Isaiah Ballinger, the natural areas manager for the CPD, was

particularly interested in engaging his crew, who manage the BWC, to redesign the space. *Bronzewood* was completed in 2019 and includes modern, geometric features for seating and reflection in the shaded woodland near Oakwood Blvd. carved from fallen trees found at the BWC and other CPD natural areas. The crew members involved in the planning and construction were from various neighborhoods, backgrounds, and cultures. Bringing these viewpoints together to create a gathering space was meaningful for all involved. Over the month it took to construct, the crew thrived on the freedom to reinterpret the original space to represent the old. Its shape was inspired by the woven willow sculptural forms and mission of *Sounding Bronzeville*. *Bronzewood* contains robust oak sculptures that, like *Sounding Bronzeville*, commemorate the

resilience and strength of African-Americans who migrated north and now call the Bronzeville community home.

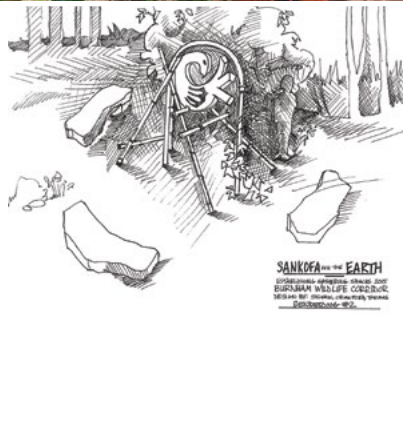
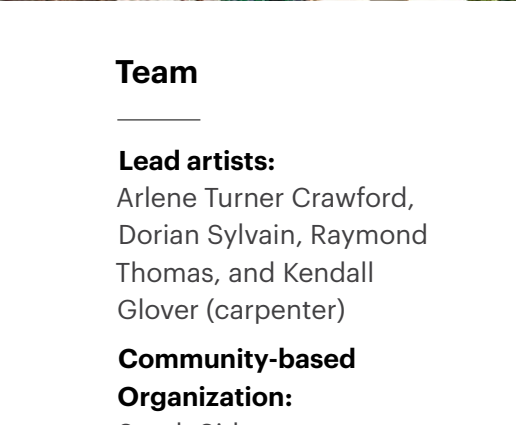
Site Activation

Sounding Bronzeville's activation was primarily led by Larissa Akinremi, Paula Robinson, Norman Teague, and Fo Wilson. "It was great to work with folks who shared a mission and desire to see this space used in a manner that was aligned with [blkHaUS studio's](#) desires for it," said Norman. *Bronzewood* has been activated by CPD on tours and meetings, as well as by local artists and residents from the nearby Bronzeville and Oakland neighborhoods. Lionel Freeman, aka Brother El, and others from the Oakland community have activated it through his event series *Sounds Natural*, a free community event featuring live music, collaborative painting, trail tours and more.



Dancers and musicians at Sounding Bronzeville during the Gathering Spaces opening celebration. Painting by Anna Murphy

Sankofa for the Earth



Team

Lead artists:

Arlene Turner Crawford, Dorian Sylvain, Raymond Thomas, and Kendall Glover (carpenter)

Community-based Organization:

South Side Community Art Center

Design and Installation

Sankofa is an African concept that means, “go back and fetch it.” It is represented by a bird holding a seed in its mouth, looking backwards towards

its tail. The message of this concept is to look to your past to be able to move forward in life. This concept was synergistic to what the CPD was planning as they reimagined the original landscape design of Daniel Burnham, with a focus on adding native wildflowers.

The site selected had a fallen tree that became a part of the design. It was located between the railroad tracks (which was a significant route for Black migrants coming into Chicago from the south) and Lake Shore Drive. Scale and structure were determined based on the

landscape conditions, and presented design challenges and opportunities for the concept development. Stability was a major concern and was addressed by creating a butterfly type body that was supported by 3 strong vertical posts. The exterior surface was adorned the exterior surface with a variety of

Making the Sankofa sculpture was a team effort, with students from Wendell Phillips High School and Bronzeville residents supporting the lead artists.

materials; paint, shell, and glass tile.

The creation of *Sankofa for the Earth* brought together artists and communities alike. The artists that collaborated had never worked together prior to this commission and building the team brought unexpected camaraderie and closeness. The team had varying and complementary skills and a willingness to suspend egos for the good of the project. Roles were



delegated based upon experience and skill sets. Communication by all involved was key. It was vital that each party (artists and the organization) participate in the shared vision. Communication protocols were developed to transparently deal with issues. Meeting notes were kept to record discussion, decisions, and schedules. Research, drawing and models were used at design meetings to vet aesthetics and structural issues. Working next to and with each other helped to evolve

the design and the skills base of the team. The trust developed with staff at the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC) was holistically supportive of the creative mission. A surprising aspect was the enthusiasm visitors to the Center had for the project and their interest to get involved. This translated into people volunteering to work on the project, and as they did, to introduce them to mosaic fundamentals through a workshop. The weaving of talents is why the piece is still standing

and admired six years later. The SSCAC and volunteers involved also helped enable the success of this project.

Site Activation

Giving the partner organization and its community an opportunity to contribute to the artistic ideas allowed them to feel ownership of the project. In some ways the project also broadened the outreach of the SSCAC by providing a satellite location outdoors in a tranquil environment.



Sankofa for the Earth is situated near a butterfly meadow which draws large numbers of monarchs and other pollinators to the space.

In addition, the project provided motivation for site visitors to come to the SSCAC after exposure to the *Sankofa for the Earth* Gathering Space. Having QR codes integrated into the *Sankofa for the Earth* mural has made it possible to direct cell phone users to websites that describe the history of the Bronzeville community, referenced by the images in the mural as well as information about

Roots & Routes, CPD, and Field Museum.

Activation activities at *Sankofa for the Earth* began at the Gathering Spaces opening ceremony in 2016, featuring Sydney Chatman's "Fly Girls," an all-girl performance group, doing a piece on Bessie Coleman, whose portrait is included on the *Sankofa for the Earth* sculpture. Also, Muntu Dance Theatre provided a drum circle performance.

Since the dedication of *Sankofa for the Earth* there have been several events to activate interest and welcome visitors to the Gathering Space:

1) In 2018, an intergenerational group participated in a silent meditation walk from the *Sounding Bronzeville* site to *Sankofa for the Earth*, observing the sounds of nature, birds, and plant life. At the end participants shared what they saw, heard and considered in their meditations.

2) The Art of Flocking was a nature walk organized with the CPD Young Cultural Stewards program. This event included an art workshop that started at the South Side Community Art Center and moved from *La Ronda Parakata* to *Sankofa for the Earth*. The walk focused on the related history and cultural aspects of each site.

3) The lead artists have organized workshops for youth aged 10–25, to repaint seating at *Sankofa for the Earth*.

4) Finally, the artists have held a nature walk and meeting with CPD Youth Stewards to discuss the Gathering Spaces and their summer of learning about environmental stewardship.

It is important to connect people with their cultural roots. This site, like others, centers culture and history in its purpose and theme. This supports activities that can engage and teach youth with nature and the Gathering Space. One mission of all public art projects is that they are able to bring positive beautiful energy into the world.



Burnham

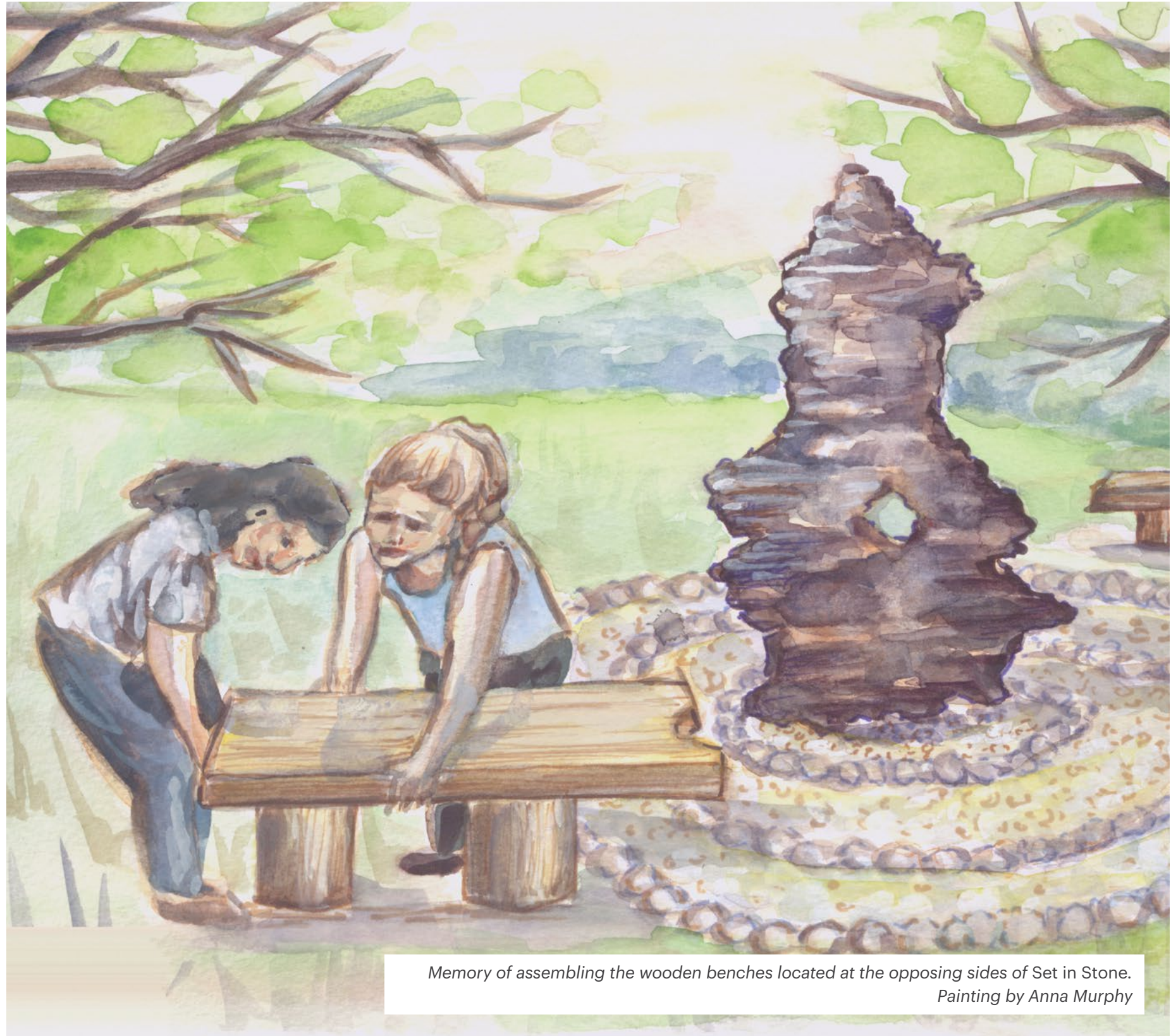
*In the eye of the snail
I traversed an eclipse
and a long silence,
slowly
like a solar engraving
I saw my body crushed in the meadow
when it dawned at noon
and everything began to spin again.*

*In the perpendicular park
a biodegradable Venus
prayed for the tumefied poet
laden with full moons and coffins,
she called starlings, crows, flowers
and grass
to chase away the shadow
and keep her fire whirling.*

*In the new shell
of the old park
I turn ahead of its lake,
in the sanctuary of the birds
I am a spinning top
that seagulls cry slowly.*

— Miguel Marzana

Written in a workshop organized by Caracol and Contratiempo in the summer of 2021.



Memory of assembling the wooden benches located at the opposing sides of Set in Stone.
Painting by Anna Murphy

INSIGHTS AND IMPACTS



We took a rigorous look at what the BWC Gathering Spaces accomplished. We received feedback from the artists and residents that participated in co-creating this initiative.

We also collected attendance and survey data at events and recorded comments in the BWC Gathering Spaces over the course of five years. What this research tells us is that the BWC Gathering Spaces connect residents to urban natural spaces, building emotional bonds, and creating new champions and stewards among those who were previously uninterested in them.

We have identified several of the key reasons why the BWC Gathering Spaces are successful. Artists and participants in the creative process cited openness and honesty among partners, the genuine ceding of responsibility and control from institutional to community partners (described as a form of trust below), the incorporation of culturally resonant

elements into design, and the truly collaborative nature in all stages of the design, build, and activation of the Spaces. A range of these keys are apparent in the following comments of a Curatorial Committee member and a Gathering Spaces lead artist:

“One thing that was very distinctive about the Gathering Spaces process for me was the amount of trust there was. You (Park District and Field Museum staff) demonstrated trust in us on the Curatorial Committee. And all of us trusted that the artists and their organizational partners would create these really amazing, powerful projects. And you were transparent that you weren’t entirely sure how to do this. But that trust was key in bringing together people that could create something worthwhile. And that is what happened — not just the products, but the process itself was meaningful, even transformative.”

— *Andres Hernandez, artist and Curatorial Committee member*

“I learned from and met various collaborators that helped to realize and contribute to our ideas. It was wonderful to work with local volunteers to realize it and I have fond memories of working over a cold winter in the Pullman factory (now a National Park) to weave our sculptures for our space. We also engaged students, young people, and others to collect our material (willow), and learned how to manipulate it to make our sculptures from an artist who had expertise working with willow. Those memories can be characterized mostly as community collaboration, camaraderie, collective creativity and cooperation, and were very rewarding.”

— *Fo Wilson, lead artist, Sounding Bronzeville*

Each of the preceding descriptions in the Teams and Spaces section note the surprising ease with which community members joined the construction process for each Gathering Space once they understood what was planned, and how it would reflect their identity and values. Once the Spaces were

completed, partners noticed the positive impact they have on visitors and themselves, sharing the following reflections:

Set in Stone

“Seeing the path leading back to the Gathering Space glowing in the light of colored paper lanterns hung in celebration of the first Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival as we convened there was truly magical.”

La Ronda Parakata

“The comforting ‘inside while outside’ sense I felt the first time I sat inside the structure repeats for me every time I visit. It’s a special feeling of being protected and embraced.”

Sankofa for the Earth

“Seeing our youth clustered around Arlene while she, in mama-griot fashion, fed them history and other knowledge — I’m so glad we have photos of those heartwarming moments.”

Under the Roots & Routes umbrella, there have been event series (e.g. an annual Mid-Autumn Festival) and a la carte events (e.g. guitar, drawing, and poetry workshops) in the BWC. These events are popular and valuable to participants:

- Between 2014 to 2021, the Field Museum, CPD, and community partners hosted 73 Roots & Routes events that attracted 4,246 attendees.
- Based on surveys conducted at Roots & Routes events, 82% of participants were interested in taking part in another event or stewardship program.
- Approximately 90% of participants indicated that the activities and programs that were offered helped them enjoy outdoor activities more, making it more desirable for them to spend time in nature.
- 82% of participants felt that the Roots & Routes activities helped them appreciate the ways that nature and culture are linked.

- 57% felt that the activities helped them learn how to explore and care for the natural environment.
- 81% said they felt more connected to nature in the city.

Some of the most compelling indications of what the Gathering Spaces have come to mean to people is apparent in what we observe and hear during and after Roots & Routes events:

Día de los Muertos 2021

“The emotions were running very high throughout the event, as the danza group made a procession up to La Ronda. People honored those who had passed in the previous year. There was deep sadness, a pandemic sadness, but also a collective relief.”

As we were cleaning up after the event, Piloto was speaking with a woman in the Space, with her 13 year old child. He called me over. She was in tears. We sat. She spoke about a disastrous two years of loss and pain. Then she looked up, dried her eyes,

and gazed around La Ronda — and said she did not even realize how much she needed her culture right now, a shared sense of tradition and way of saying goodbye, because so much loneliness and separation dominated her life. This day, this ceremony and open sky, was a balm for her. Looking at her son, she said that days like this, places like this, a shared experience like this had been lacking for him — replaced by screens. She wants this to be part of his life and plans to remind him and build upon what occurred on this Día de los Muertos at La Ronda.”

[Observed by Jacob Campbell, Environmental Anthropologist, Field Museum]

Memories of Caracol

“Dancer Nejla Yatkin performed Sunrise: Burnham Wildlife Corridor at Caracol. On a video posted on YouTube, we see a documentation of her performance amidst grasses and coneflowers with Lake Michigan in the background as the sun rises over the water.”

Soft orange, pink, lilac hues from the sky reflect on the water surface as arms and hands gracefully poke in and out of the picture frame, dancing amongst the plants. This performance, funded by CPD’s Night Out in the Parks, embodies the best features of the Gathering Spaces: humans and culture consciously embedded in nature in a spirit of awe and appreciation.”

[Observed by Georgina Valverde, lead artist, Caracol]

Finally, the process for creating the Gathering Spaces, and the Spaces themselves have been models and inspiration for similar projects in the Chicago area. The Forest Preserves of Cook County (FPCC), Field Museum, and CPD worked together starting in 2020 to develop a gathering space at Beaubien Woods Forest Preserve on Chicago’s far South Side. FPCC is a holder of even larger tracts of land in the Chicago region than CPD and extends the positive potential of gathering spaces to additional Chicago and

suburban communities. The design process followed a similar model of using a community based Curatorial Committee to select a team of artist(s) and a community group to create the kind of culturally resonant and usable spaces as were made in the BWC.

In 2021, the Illinois Science and Energy Innovation Foundation created a grant program named *E(art)H Chicago* to support public art projects focused on environmental justice and climate change themes.

11 projects were awarded nearly \$550,000 in total and are in the fabrication period as this Guidebook goes to print, with all work to be unveiled and activated in June 2023. Leaders of this initiative credited the BWC Gathering Spaces example as informing the structure of *E(art)H Chicago’s* curatorial process, its emphasis on community activation of sites, and overall project essence. Further details on both of these cases can be found in the Appendix.





SECTION 3:

*TOOLS AND TIPS TO
INSPIRE ACTION*

The authors of this guide seek to inspire and facilitate future green space interventions that bring together art, cultural heritage and ecology.

We also hope to foster greater exchange among those interested in this form of work that might lead to new collaborations, insight and collective impact. Both in Chicago and nationally, innovators are engaging these themes in exciting ways. The approach taken in the BWC is one among many, and our objective is to contribute to this larger community of practice.

“How do you create a space that has power in its natural positioning; a place that is culturally resonant through its aesthetic appeal, yet offers a welcoming energy to all who approach it? How do you create a place with a view, a place to meditate – or share with a group – a place to create, to emote, to listen, to breathe in nature’s throng and smote the compression of the status quo’s refrain? I ask again...then bow in the gathering’s hold.”

— Mike Dimitroff, CPD Manager of Art Initiatives

In an effort to share what has been learned through the BWC Gathering Spaces experience, we have selected some kernels of insight that we think could be helpful to others interested in undertaking a similar endeavor, saving time and increasing efficiency.

1 Establish a solid application and review process up front

Determine a workable structure — and don’t reinvent the wheel (if you don’t have to).

Examples of this kind of work exist in various formats around the world now. Since it is often easier to start from something rather than nothing, pull from and borrow what is useful from those who have gone before. The development of the Requests For Proposals and evaluation rubrics for the BWC Gathering Spaces took a considerable amount of time that other organizers might not have; our templates can be a starting point for the development of these important elements. Any and all restrictions or parameters regarding the design and/or installation of the final products should be clearly stated in the application materials; a Request For Proposals is helpful in providing this clarity.



gatheringspaces.org/featuredprojects

“This project was dynamic and crafted from the ground up. There was a lot of confidence and energy that came from everyone, eventually, seeing the power and integrity of the system we were developing. We set up something very rigorous and at the same time very generous.”

— Carla Mayer, writer, activist and Curatorial Committee member

Acknowledge where compromise does and does not exist.

This advice is helpful for any evaluative process, but in this case it is important to define what creative placemaking means to you. If it is deemed essential that the design include and reflect community

input, be sure to select an artist or artist team willing and able to genuinely listen to residents and share the creative process. Additionally, it will likely be necessary that the selected artist(s) create structures that are sound and safe in a publicly accessible natural environment, in which case their past experience with outdoor public art should not be underestimated.

Allow enough time for thoughtful vetting.

A rushed decision is likely not the best decision, especially when a multi-faceted, nuanced product is the desired end result. Build time into your process for adequate proposal evaluation, which may include scoring, discussion, and the input of additional information.



“We had ample time to review projects, meet in person to discuss as judges and then meet with finalists to ask even more clarifying questions. That helped ensure confidence that projects could be executed (and at budget) from start to finish.”

— Elizabeth Corr, Associate Director of Arts & Cultural Partnerships, National Resource Defense Council, Curatorial Committee member

2 Ensure adequate support for execution and upkeep

Recognize that there are important, non-financial ways to supplement a tight budget.

If the financial resources are not available to fully support all aspects of the project, consider what costs could be reduced or eliminated. Donated studio space, materials, labor, and waived permit fees were ways that project-related expenses were offset in the Gathering Spaces example. Studio space was donated by partner organizations; additional labor was provided by recruited students, volunteers and institutional staff; and CPD provided and delivered certain natural and recycled materials to the sites, such as logs, wooden planks, branches, stone, gravel, and concrete artifacts.

Build site maintenance into any agreements or contracts.

It is inevitable that anything located outdoors in a public space for an extended period of time is going to

be affected by the elements — and, perhaps, by other, less natural forces, like vandalism. To reduce accusations of shirked responsibility on the part of any of the involved parties, it is imperative that the intended lifespan of the installation be spelled out and responsibilities for maintenance during that time frame be assigned. Keep in mind that maintenance may pertain to the natural landscape as well as the built infrastructure, in which case a commitment from the landowner is needed in addition to that from the partner organization and artist(s).

3 Deliberately set the stage for successful site activation

Involve those who can deliver relevant programming from the beginning.

If the intention of your project is to have the resulting gathering space(s) activated through programming, it is important to include organizations or individuals capable of delivering such events from the inception of the process. If they are not brought in at that point, the resulting space may not reflect their values or interests and may not be suitably arranged to support programming. Do not assume that simply because the gathering space exists that someone will use it.

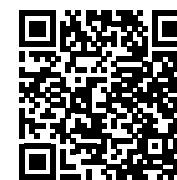
Encourage strong partnerships between artists and communities.

Not all artists who are adept at creating public art are also interested or experienced in delivering site activation programming; therefore, if site activation is a priority, another entity must be engaged. In the case of the

BWC Gathering Spaces, the application required a formal (signed) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between artists and community organizations, and, technically, the application was to be submitted on behalf of a team comprised of these two entities. Not only was the MOU meant to facilitate future programming, it was considered an indication of artists' connections to the communities their designs were intended to represent. While many of the artists interested in the BWC Gathering Spaces were already strongly rooted in their communities, which overlapped with the specific communities of interest for this project, some were not. Those teams whose ties did not exist prior to the BWC Gathering Spaces, and whose connections were tenuous, struggled to work together effectively.

Collaboratively fundraise and seek fair compensation for partners.

Large institutional partners should leverage staff time and access to funders to help sustain programming and stewardship of the sites. A consistent, shared funding strategy ensures artists and community organizations are paid for contributed time and commit to ongoing engagement.



gatheringspaces.org/featuredprojects

4 Build relationships among partners, residents and fellow practitioners

Invest adequate energy for creating and sustaining relationships.

Sustained communication and support among institutional partners, artists, community organizations and residents are key ingredients for successful green space interventions such as the BWC Gathering Spaces. Roots & Routes has provided a mechanism for partners to show up for each other, ask for and provide help, test out new ideas, and maintain traditions. Your project will benefit from trust established in similar ways, and the bonds created among collaborators through this collective work are often meaningful to people.

Seek out those who are re-imagining nature in cities.

Urban green space design is at a turning point. New voices and perspectives are gaining authority in these processes, with bold ideas emerging that center the priorities of historically disinvested communities for parks and natural areas nearest them. Exchange and listening is critical, across different sectors and teams. The authors ask that you stay engaged with us, sharing lessons and experiences from your work, questions you may have about ours, and possibilities for potential collaboration.



gatheringspaces.org/contact
rootsnroutes@fieldmuseum.org

APPENDIX

Inspiring Local Case Examples

Extending the Gathering Space Model to Beaubien Woods

Gathering Space name: *Prairie Boat*

Lead artist: Christine Perri

2nd artist: Roman Villarreal

Community Partner: Imani Village, a community building initiative of Trinity United Church of Christ

With the success of the BWC Gathering Spaces, the Field Museum and Forest Preserves of Cook County (FPCC) saw an opportunity to develop a Gathering Space at Beaubien Woods Forest Preserve on Chicago's far South Side. Beaubien Woods is a 279-acre preserve with significant areas of habitat restoration and it is used by county residents for fishing, picnicking, accessing the Little Calumet River, and appreciating nature. It is underused however, particularly by residents of nearby working class and public housing communities, and in areas where safety is a concern. As in the BWC, creating a Gathering Space here offers the opportunity to create culturally inclusive, and thus welcoming, symbols and structures. The Gathering Space provides the chance for people to come to a designated place in the preserve in groups for events, and the possibility to create the kind of usable space local

organizations want for recreational, wellness, heritage, and stewardship programming.

The Gathering Space design process at Beaubien Woods followed the BWC model, namely creating a community-based Curatorial Committee to select from proposals developed jointly by artists and a community-based organization (CBO). The Curatorial Committee completed a public input process to determine what local residents and organizations wanted in a Gathering Space, conducted an RFP process, and selected a winning design for the future Gathering Space. The design of *Prairie Boat* acknowledges the centrality of the Little Calumet River to the long cultural and natural heritage of the area, particularly its crossing by Freedom Seekers escaping enslavement heading to Canada in the two decades preceding the Civil War, and the allies they found in the Chicago region.

The value of flexibility and experimentation were evident in the Gathering Space design process at Beaubien Woods. Based on differences between the near South Side of Chicago (Bronzeville and Pilsen both near to the BWC) and Riverdale (the community area that is home to Beaubien Woods), there were significant modifications made to the process.



These included:

1) We conducted three formal information gathering sessions (in visible public spaces) at which residents were invited to use maps, note cards, and drawings to express their preferences for the site and the site design. This helped

address the degree to which potential site artists were less often community members themselves than in the BWC process; and we will likely continue this step in future Gathering Space design processes for its value in developing community support from the outset.

2) The Curatorial Committee was made up of artists and representatives of CBOs, rather than mostly community-affiliated artists. This broadening of participation initially was just in response to the fewer numbers of artists with public art experience in the

Riverdale area, but proved helpful for broadening perspectives on what should be the committee’s design priorities. The Curatorial Committee meetings also included technical art advisors from the CPD to bring construction and project expertise.

3) The lead artist, Christine Perri, whose design was selected through the Request For Proposals process, was less “of the community” than those artists who created the BWC Gathering Space designs. This happened in part because despite a wide call for artists, fewer public installation artists expressed interest in and appeared to be working directly in Riverdale and the far South Side than in communities near the BWC. This part of Chicago is less visible to outsiders in general than either Bronzeville or Pilsen/Little Village that function as heritage enclaves of African American and Mexican American communities respectively. Perri compensated for her outsider status by paying particular attention to community feedback, carefully considering material the committee shared about local history, and enlisting local collaborators for the design and construction processes.

4. Funded by an Illinois Coastal Management Program grant with support from Illinois Department of Natural Resources and NOAA, the Beaubien Woods Gathering Space process was able to incorporate lessons learned from the BWC and provided larger stipends (\$2000) from the outset of the process for the expertise and time of the Curatorial Committee members (attending a one-hour meeting approximately every other week for nine months).

The early installation process has been markedly collaborative. Longtime Southeast Side artist Roman Villareal will create select sculptural elements that depict animals. Apprentice artists of Imani Village are creating panels depicting local heritage for installation around the base of the boat’s “hull,” and art students from nearby Carver Military Academy High School are preparing the log discs for the river path that winds through the center of *Prairie Boat*.

Opening is scheduled for early November 2022 or the spring of 2023, and will be marked by a celebratory event. Continued programming will be offered by Imani Village that is dedicated to making it a valued gathering space of South Siders from 95th Street to the southern suburbs. Other local organizations who work in health (TCA Health) and environmental justice (People for Community Recovery) intend to use the space for their wellness programs and other public events. The broad interest in the use of *Prairie Boat* is attributable to the extended, collegial, and wide-reaching planning process with community groups, those on the Curatorial Committee at its core.

Environmental Justice and Public Art: *E(art)H Chicago*

A statement from Uzma Noormohamed, Program Director, Illinois Science & Energy Innovation Foundation:

“The Roots & Routes initiative and the work done along the BWC was instrumental in informing the *E(art)H Chicago* program. When we learned of the BWC work

we were excited by the parallels of community activation, art, and natural environment to our program. The lessons we learned from the BWC team directly led to the success of our program and can be summarized as: (1) essence (2) stakeholders and process, and (3) community ownership.

1) Essence

The pairing of community organizations and artists was a hypothetical for *E(art)H Chicago* until we learned from the BWC team that they had a model and demonstration of this pairing. The BWC team’s demonstration of organizations connecting with artists to create art and Gathering Spaces confirmed for us that this was a possible feat, and the addition of the art serving as a Gathering Space in our RFP was a direct learning from the BWC and the thought given to the afterlife of an art piece and its continued activation. Conversations with Field Museum and CPD staff confirmed to us that their model was replicable, and we did in some form replicate it.

2) Stakeholders and Process

The BWC team shared its contacts in both the CPD and other nonprofit partners. Through this connection we learned of the intricacies of placing art in a public space and created our criteria for preferred locations and physical requirements. The connections at the CPD were instrumental in executing our work and continue to be supporters of our selected artists as they undergo the process of siting locations within the Parks. Unlike the BWC project, *E(art)H Chicago* did not have a designated site to place the art. However, many of the

lessons learned from the BWC applied to placing art on various sites.

We also created our curatorial and review committee based on the BWC team’s experience with this process. We aimed for our review committee to be representative of the three sectors of arts, environment and community — with attention to racial and neighborhood representation. Additionally, conversations with Field Museum staff revealed to us that we should prioritize neighborhoods with fewer public art assets, and directly resulted in one of the criteria we employed to rank proposals.

3) Community Ownership and Life after Installation

There was much exploration and discussion around how physical art pieces will be stewarded once installed. The BWC team was immensely helpful in informing us of practical ways to ensure maintenance and community ownership of physical art. Though we ultimately did not use the same model due to our process’ time constraints, we learned about the importance of involving community organizations from the beginning of the process in order to maintain ownership and activation of the piece. Many of these learnings were incorporated in advising artists, and were applied in select projects.”

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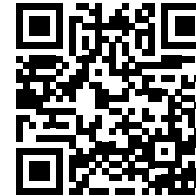
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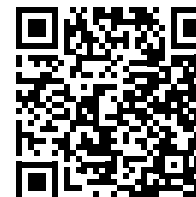
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BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Evidence suggests that information becomes more accessible, public spaces become more inclusive, depth and breadth of knowledge expands, and urban planning efforts become more equitable when conducted in collaboration with artists and communicated through arts-based mediums (Rodríguez-Labajos & Ray 2021; Trisos et al. 2021; Ellison et al. 2018; Jasmi & Mohamad 2016; Lesen et al. 2016). Scholars, practitioners and activists have destabilized the boundaries between urban ecology and conservation, human health and wellbeing, and economic prosperity, instead arguing that cities are interconnected biological-physical-social entities (Plieninger et al. 2015; Tanner et al. 2014; Ardakani & Oloonabadi 2011). Natural spaces offer significant health, social, cultural, and environmental benefits, which can be expanded when augmented with public arts and cultural programming (Thomson et al. 2020;

Tanner et al. 2014; Montambault et al. 2017). Culturally relevant nature-based programs can generate a greater sense of community, decreased social isolation, and improved self-esteem and self-confidence among participants (Thomson et al. 2020; Lees & Melhuish 2015). Researchers have identified multiple forms of value in projects that create spaces and experiences at the intersection of art, nature, and culture (Campbell et al. 2015), especially within the current socio-economic climate, as part of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (Mughal et al. 2022; Chaudhury & Banerjee 2020), for immigrant or displaced populations (de Castro 2021; Gladkikh et al. 2019; Othman et al. 2013), and as climate change becomes more severe (Elands et al. 2019; Vierikko et al. 2016; Evans and Foord, 2008).

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