



Practices of Freedom

Building the Movement in Fragile City: Creative Responses to Hyper-Development as Public Pedagogy

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In New York City, real estate development surrounds us: an economic, cultural and geographic expression of white privilege and power. This type of development causes those with limited financial resources, especially people of color and immigrants, to be displaced from their communities¹, due to the unaffordable costs of paying for housing in a landscape dominated by the real estate development industry. As the neighborhood with the highest rate of new construction in the entire U.S.A.², Long Island City (L.I.C.), Queens, NYC, is being transformed from a mixed industrial/residential area to a land of shiny towers and skyrocketing property values.

The relationship between the arts and real estate development is complex. Often, developers leverage art, artists, and cultural organizations to justify their own gains, a process known as “artwashing”. Most artists and arts organizations are severely under-funded, so some accept and appreciate any support provided by developers – and feel beholden to them. However, some artists are part of community-based movements that believe in and fight for the rights of neighborhood residents and small businesses to be able to stay in neighborhoods, and prioritize communities’ needs rather than letting profit-driven real estate development have its way. And as small commercial tenants, many artists who rent work space are also vulnerable to being displaced because of rising rents.

¹ (Angotti & Morse, 2017)

² (Balint, 2017)



Image 1. Above: L.I.C. skyline, 2017. Below: A sign in L.I.C., 2019. Images: Priscilla Stadler

Art can play an important role in informal education about social issues, including the threat of displacement. Both as an artist with a workspace in L.I.C. and as a worker at a public university in this neighborhood, I am a stakeholder in this community. Using my creative work to investigate this contested landscape includes inviting the public, other artists, and activists to collaborate as learners who are exploring the forces behind profit-driven real estate. My work spans community engagement/social practice projects as well as making objects, such as fabric installations. I examine themes related to vulnerability on individual and community levels.



Image 2. Video still from Building the Movement: Fragile City and Beyond, May, 2017. Fabric installation and performances at Upstanders, LIC Arts Open.

Building the Movement was inspired in part as a reaction to the comments of a real estate developer who said he would temporarily discount a bookstore's rent because "[w]e think it's important for the soul of the neighborhood"³. We used this comment as a springboard to examine the meaning of "the soul of the neighborhood", and who believes they have the right to determine what is important for that soul. Collaborators Karesia Batan and Ezra Goh danced through my *Fragile City* fabric installation while organizer Grace Chung and I performed her text, a tribute to activism and the true soul of the neighborhood, not one determined by real estate developers making profits. I also invited visitors to write their answers to "What is the soul of Long Island City? Sights? Sounds? Smells?" on clear plastic, which we pinned on to the installation.

³ (Hughes, 2017)



Image 3. Dancers Karesia Batan and Leah Smit perform as part of 'What's Up with LIC?' [creative responses to hyper-development], September, 2017, Queens Art Intervention's Dwelling project.

For *What's Up with LIC?* [creative responses to hyper-development], collaborator Grace Chung and I teamed up again, this time to design a walk/treasure hunt where participants visited sites with artists and activists who shared experiences of displacement in L.I.C. through presenting research or performing (Images 3 and 4). By interacting with dancers, a spoken word artist, a journalist, activists, and a performer acting as "LIC's Sleaziest Real Estate Broker", participants learned about the neighborhood's history and the impact that hyper-development has had here.



Image 4: L.I.C.'s "Sleaziest Real Estate Broker" offers participants a "today only deal" on a pricey apartment

After walking, participants were encouraged to share their own creative responses to hyper-development through making art. O.R.D. [The Oracle of Real-estate Development], is a participatory project (Image 5) inviting passersby to write down a question related to real estate, then select a random answer. The answers are phrases selected from my research related to displacement and development. We compile all the questions and answers onto a larger "scroll" which, at the end of the event, forms an "Oracle Poem". Participants and passersby are invited to help perform a reading of the day's collective poem. The playfulness of the interactions offer an informal way for people to learn about the political, economic and cultural impacts of development and displacement.



Image 5 (Above): ORD [Oracle of Real-estate Development] Street interaction. Image: Katya Kahn. (Below): Detail of several questions and answers on ORD Poem Scroll. Image: Priscilla Stadler.

Development and gentrification continue to privilege white wealth and cause the displacement of communities of color, immigrants, and artists. This process is not inevitable, but it can only be changed through a broad-based movement that prioritizes community needs over the profit motives of developers and corporations. A powerful example of such an organizing effort succeeded recently when the proposed

opening of Amazon's headquarters in Long Island City was withdrawn following multiple protests by local activists, community members, and elected officials.

Informal pedagogy that provides opportunities to learn about issues impacting the lives of community members, especially those who have the least financial resources and are most vulnerable to displacement is a key part of any community organizing, because it can lead to taking action. Pedagogy of this type can take many forms, and participatory creative engagement can provide one of the most dynamic ways for people to learn.

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