

# "...and other such stories": Re-Framing the Narrative of Contemporary Architecture

by Phillip Barcio

Architecture does more than simply fulfill the utilitarian need for built spaces. It also defines the cultural priorities of the civilization that creates it. A building isn't just a container. It's an aesthetic statement—a declaration of how a society prioritizes its resources, its people, and its culture.

Since its inauguration in 2015, the Chicago Architectural Biennial has been on the forefront of the conversation about architecture's duality of purpose.

The 2015 edition, titled "The State of the Art of Architecture," broadly looked at the ways innovators within the architectural field were evolving to address contemporary social concerns, while the 2017 edition, "MAKE NEW HISTORY," reflected on the ways new modes of architectural production connect to the roll-out of civic progress.

The 2019 edition considerably ups the ante. Titled "...and other such stories," its curatorial vision positions architecture not as a singular discipline at all, but as a tool to be wielded to initiate cultural change. Artistic Director Yesomi Umolu and her curatorial team of Sepake Angiama and Paulo Tavares frame the architectural field as a platform through which architects and non-architects alike can address a range of contemporary social concerns.

The exhibitor roster represents 20 nations and includes a multi-generational, multi-racial, and multi-disciplinary perspective. A significant number of the more than 80 participants identify not as architects, but as visual artists, activists, performers, academics, and historians.

In addition to broadening the type of exhibitor invited to participate, "...and other such stories" will increase the footprint of the Biennial, expanding the reach of its message to audiences that might not otherwise encounter the show. Along with its main venue—the Chicago Cultural Center, at Washington Street and Michigan Avenue, across from Grant Park—simultaneous programming will unfold at sites all over the city, hosted by more than 40 outside partners, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Elmhurst Art Museum, the National Public Housing Museum, Navy Pier, Carrie

Secrist Gallery, The 606 with the High Line Network, and Wrightwood 659.

We're not just talking about the architectural pictures and models you might expect. Visitors will be treated to theatrical performances, educational experiences, art shows, and other novel programming aimed at demonstrating the crucial role architecture plays in everything from climate change to social justice.

The evolution of the Chicago Architecture Biennial from what could have merely been a professional event for architects into a cultural event centered on architecture's role in the broader culture has been led in part by Todd Palmer, who serves as executive director of the organization.

"Rather than just focusing on an examination of the latest buildings, we've managed to push the discourse of architecture as a cultural practice," Palmer says. "In the first two editions, we gave respect to the history of architecture and to products and innovations not necessarily pushing aesthetic envelopes, but just thinking about how we can look at what came before. We asked how we can establish practices that make looking to the past and learning from the past essential to the practice of architecture."

Palmer's background in architectural theory and history has made him especially interested in discovering the evolving expectations people have for their built environments.

"Absolutely this is about social change," Palmer says. "But I would argue that architecture has always been a tool for change. So the question is, what does change mean?"



Todd Palmer. Photo by Zachary Johnston.

As an example, Palmer points out that an architect's work intrinsically addresses climate change, whether it's meant to or not. If architects choose to become as literate as possible about the effects of their materials and processes, they can at least claim their agency in the effort to stabilize the climate, rather than bumbling through their work without any knowledge of exactly how it might affect the ecosystem.

Another example Palmer gives has to do with changing questions about whose needs the built environment is intended to serve.

"If you build a palace in Versailles, you're addressing the needs of a king and not the people," he says.

If an architect is designing a public space, that work needs to be done in a more conscientious, collaborative way if the space is truly going to serve the public good.

"These things are not un-connected," says Palmer. "It's a question of context. You're impacting the social sphere either by your attention or your lack of attention. Architects have unique skills, so they need to invite other professions and crafts to be at the table together. The organization of so many sub-disciplines is needed to execute a work of architecture that addresses a social question."

One word Palmer likes to use when he talks about the goals of the Biennial is literacy. Another is learning.

"In this day and age, learning is something that must be continuous," Palmer says. "When I was in school, I thought I'd get a master's degree and a PhD and then be done, but I was quickly disavowed of that notion. The technological changes of the digital environment, along with changing social pressures—the only way to keep up is to learn."

In respect to their broad educational potential, Palmer highlighted for us three of this year's exhibitors. First is the work of Emmanuel Pratt and Sweet Water Foundation, which Palmer says "is something not to miss."

"He has been working around the South Side of Chicago," says Palmer. "He's trained as an architect but has been working on creating an urban farm. But more than that, he expanded it to incorporate a carpentry workshop that created the first barn in Chicago since the 19th century. It gets into ecology and creating an ecosystem that involves business and entrepreneurship."

For the Biennial, Pratt has been working to recreate the worker's bungalow, using it as a tool to train the carpenters.

"The whole thing is about using vacant lots and creating something that can be replicated and scaled," Palmer says. "The work connects architecture and fields that go far beyond it."

Another exhibitor Palmer is excited about is the City of Detroit Planning and Development Department (PDD). As a leading player in the redevelopment of one of the largest American post-industrial cities, PDD is expected by Palmer to offer a range of valuable and unique lessons that transcend what visitors might ordinarily think of as the domain of architecture.

Palmer also points to a project by Ilze Wolff, an architect from South Africa, which will recreate "an evocation of a house" built by an African woman in the time of Apartheid. The project blends architectural visions of the professional with those of the untrained, offering viewers an inspirational point of departure that Palmer sees as essential to the Biennial's success.



*Sweet Water Foundation Thought Barn, Chicago, IL (Installation ongoing, September 2017–present).*



*African Mobilities*: This is not a refugee camp exhibition. Munich, 2018, curated by Dr Mpho Matsipa at Architektur Museum TUM,

Model view of exhibition design by @wolffcapetown. Photo by Lindsey Appolis @appster.

The optimism and passion in Palmer's voice is obvious, and the aspirational attitude of this year's Biennial's organizers is undeniable—their idealistic curation strives towards what architecture could be at its most constructive. One cannot even imagine the immense impact that will likely be made by the impending four months of thoughtful, ambitious, city-wide programming, as countless seeds are planted by "...and other such stories" in Chicago communities and beyond.

Nonetheless, I wonder if this ambitious curatorial vision will not also be without its detractors. Is the Biennial really for everyone? The curatorial statement on the Biennial website is almost unreadably dense—clearly intended for an elite audience. And the whole idea of "using" architecture as a social "tool" feels like it comes right out of the colonizer's playbook.

Granted, the strategy of capturing architecture to serve as a weapon for societal change is being wielded here for secular, progressive purposes, but the idea still reeks of power brokers and systemic cultural manipulation. Do we really need teams of academics, artists

and activists descending upon our neighborhoods explaining to us all the ways we are illiterate about the esoteric hidden meanings of our homes and gathering places? Sometimes a house is just a house.

For his part, Palmer is convinced the pedantic qualities of the curation will have positive effects.

"Hopefully, it's a pleasure to come through the Biennial and have your eyes opened to something you've never thought about, or not thought about in this way," he says. "Hopefully viewers will see it as an opportunity to face a challenge."

"...and other such stories," the 2019 Chicago Architectural Biennial, opens September 19, 2019—the same day as EXPO Chicago—and will run through January 5, 2020. For complete programming information, visit [chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org](http://chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org).

**Phillip Barcio is an art writer and fiction author whose work appears regularly in *Hyperallergic*, *IdeelArt*, *La Gazette Drouot* and the *New Art Examiner*. His fiction has appeared in *Space Squid* and the *Swamp Ape Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Western Humanities Review*.**

*Fitzgerald Neighborhood Revitalization Plan.*  
Spackman Mossop  
Michaels.



**NEW  
ART**  
examiner

Established 1973

THE INDEPENDENT VOICE OF THE VISUAL ARTS

Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York

Volume 34 No. 1 September/October 2019

# ENDLESS FORMS



## INSIDE

Changes at this year's Chicago Architecture Biennial  
Tara Donovan creates endless forms with common materials

Virgil Abloh explores intersection of art and design

Guggenheim exhibit establishes Mapplethorpe's mastery

A visit with a photographic great, the late Barbara Crane

\$8 U.S.