

# Beekeepers and the Art of Urban Rebirth

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January 30, 2017



A bee sanctuary, inspired by a forest that overtook the site of a long-shuttered housing project, provides summer jobs for youth in St. Louis, Missouri. Photo courtesy of Juan William Chávez.

By Juan William Chávez | January 30, 2017

The plight of public housing projects conceived with the best of intentions and then failing horribly is by now well-known in communities across America. Less known—and still unfolding—is the story of what happens next, both to the people who lived there and the physical spaces those projects inhabited.

As an artist and cultural activist in St. Louis, Missouri, I've long been interested in the relationship between physical space and the needs of people and communities—in what works and what doesn't. About a decade ago, I began focusing this question on the site where once stood Pruitt-Igoe, one of America's most notorious public housing failures.

The project, named for Wendell O. Pruitt, an African-American fighter pilot in World War II, and William L. Igoe, a white former U.S. Congressman, was completed in 1954. It was located just two miles northwest of the Gateway Arch, and envisioned as one of the nation's most ambitious attempts to address urban squalor. Its 33 highrise apartment buildings, with 2,870 units, were designed by Minoru Yamasaki, who went on to design the World Trade Center in New York City.

But the project was plagued with problems from the start, both in its design and in its profound inadequacy in addressing the economic, social, and demographic needs of residents. By the early 1970s, most of the buildings were uninhabitable, their hallways vandalized and their windows broken. In 1972, they were demolished via a spectacular, widely televised implosion that soon came to epitomize the failed trajectory of public housing nationwide.



Left: an aerial view of Pruitt-Igoe. Right: a sculpture by Juan William Chávez referencing the housing development, built from abandoned beehives. Left image courtesy of Missouri History Museum. Right image courtesy of Juan William Chávez.

Over time, and years of neglect, the vast vacant lot that was once the Pruitt-Igoe projects transformed into what I came to think of as the Pruitt-Igoe forest. In 2009, I was working on community-based art projects in North St. Louis. On my drive to work, I regularly passed the Pruitt-Igoe forest. Viewing it from the street, I daydreamed about what might be inside. At first, the forest seemed intimidatingly abandoned and potentially dangerous, but before long it beckoned me. I entered on foot to take photographs. I walked on weather-worn asphalt and saw overgrown weeds sprouting from dirt mounds, with bits of gravel, brick, and crushed concrete. Mosses revealed the vague outlines of old streets. There were a variety of native plants, and oak and hickory trees. I saw hawks, owls, rabbits, and deer. I had thought I would find the remains of a past civilization, but to my surprise I saw the beginning of a new community. This undisturbed vacant lot had become a sanctuary for an entire ecosystem.

I started thinking about Pruitt-Igoe's mission. The development had been created to foster community. Could it somehow return to that function? Did any community exist at Pruitt-Igoe now? One day, as I photographed some bees pollinating a patch of native flowers, it hit me: These buzzing insects were Pruitt-Igoe's new community. Bees and St. Louisans were in a similar situation. St. Louis's population had fallen to its lowest in a century. At the same time—for reasons ranging from the use of pesticides and industrial farming to the loss of native plant habitats to illness caused by parasites—bees were dying off. This posed a threat to humans, since bees pollinate our food. Perhaps Pruitt-Igoe could provide a place to reinvigorate the partnership between bees and humans, creating a kind of sanctuary for both. Its story could end on a positive note, with one of the worst failures of public housing becoming a leading example of revitalization.



I thought I would transform the urban forest into a public preserve, cultivating community through on-site beekeeping and urban agriculture. The aim was to memorialize the past and provide opportunity for the future. But with Pruitt-Igoe's fate tied up with controversial development plans—construction for a new “urban village” planned for the site still hasn't begun—my scientific and artistic colleagues and I decided instead to initiate a one-acre pilot program that I called the Living Proposal, in the adjacent neighborhood of Old North. A Guggenheim fellowship and a Creative Capital artist's grant provided funding to construct a sanctuary.

Working on a feral property surrounded by other vacant lots, we built our bee-friendly environment. We designed an apiary with two hives and garden beds, where we planted pesticide-free, pollinator-friendly native plants, vegetables, fruit trees and berry bushes so the bees would have a variety of food sources. Flowers bloomed, the pollinators arrived, and our beehives began to produce honey. Every season, the Living Proposal became more established, with strong and healthy hives. It became part of a bigger movement of urban beekeeping, committed to rebuilding the dwindling bee population. Scientists have found surprisingly high numbers of bee species in cities that are absent in nearby rural lands. According to St. Louis University's Sustainability Science Lab, St. Louis is currently providing habitat for a third of Missouri's bees.



Bees at the Living Proposal sanctuary in St. Louis, Missouri. Photo courtesy of Juan William Chávez.

As the bees flourished in the sanctuary, it became time to incorporate our human neighbors into the hive. We developed the Young Honey Crew, a summer youth program that teaches students the importance of bees to our health. The students wear bee suits to inspect the hives, maintain the garden from seed to harvest, follow recipes to prepare food from the garden for lunch, and create artwork celebrating their connectedness to bees, the environment, and each other. The Young Honey Crew became especially meaningful in

2014 after the death of Michael Brown, the unarmed teenager who was killed by police in nearby Ferguson. With overwhelming tension and protests throughout the city, our students sought space to think, create, and talk. The Living Proposal became their sanctuary, a place for constructive contemplation.

From that point forward, our workshops focused more on community and collective thinking. In 2015 we invited our North St. Louis neighbor, Paulette, to initiate a senior women's support group, the Wise Women. These queen bees of the community gather weekly to share a meal, support, and celebrate each other. Last year, with backing from Artpace San Antonio, we built the "Honey Trailer," a vintage trailer designed for bee advocacy, health education, and job training. Starting this summer, the Honey Trailer—which is outfitted with solar panels, a grow room, a small kitchen a flat screen TV to provide information about bees, cooking, and our program—will visit schools, parks, festivals, and farmers markets around St. Louis and other cities.

Back in 2009, soon after I first started venturing into the abandoned forest, I made a sculpture, stacking defunct beehives to create a scaled-down version of a Pruitt-Igoe building. There were pheromone residues in the hive boxes, and they started to attract new bees. I was surrounded by the time the sculpture was completed. Not wearing any protective clothing I moved with hesitation, but my nervousness dissipated as the bees became less curious about my activity and more focused on the sculpture itself.

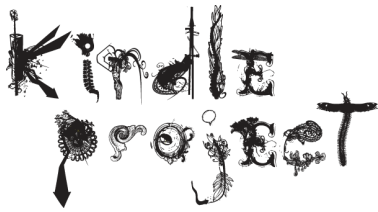
I saw the bees work as a group, build a haven, and use ideas to make honey: the alchemy of the studio within an ecosystem. The experience led directly to building the bee sanctuary. By creating a healthier environment for bees, we're making a better environment for ourselves and our neighborhoods.

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**Kindle loves this project because...** Northside Workshop's innovation with the Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary proves that art, community building through urban agriculture, and education can have a transformative impact. By inviting young people of North Saint Louis to be in a space where they can explore not only the land they live on, but the cultural climate they are living in exemplifies the kind of creative change making we so admire.



Game Changers

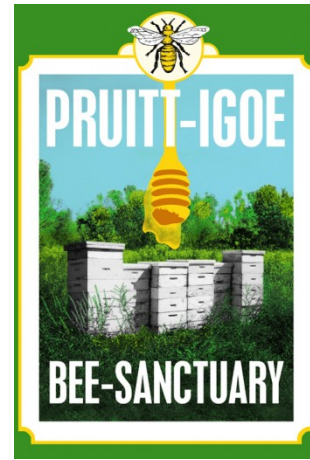
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## Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary

Jan 23, 2015

## **Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary** **by Juan William Chávez**

As an artist, I use the studio as a space to contemplate, explore, develop and discover new ideas. I create an environment where I can approach projects with a beginner's mind by opening myself up to the possibilities with eagerness and a lack of preconceived notions. Beginner's mind has many possibilities, is free of influences, and is open to unknown potential that can lead to transformation. Transforming ideas, objects, and the environment is the foundation of the art experience which often leads to innovation and problem solving issues that are complexed or abstract. I developed a collective practice when I began focusing on socially engaged art projects in North Saint Louis in 2010 through a non-profit organization named Northside Workshop (NSW). NSW is a nonprofit art space dedicated to addressing cultural and community issues in North Saint Louis through experiential workshops that promote engagement among residents. These projects allowed me to begin expanding my own notion of the studio and brought me to ask myself challenging questions about what can be deemed a studio.



### **Northside Workshop – Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary**

The Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary is a proposal for the City of Saint Louis to transform the urban forest where the...

<http://www.pruitt-igoebesanctuary.com/>

In 2010, Northside Workshop began to develop the Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary, a public proposal aiming to transform the urban forest where the Pruitt-Igoe housing development once stood into a public space that preserves the remaining 33 acres of green space to cultivate community through beekeeping and urban agriculture. The 33 acres of green space began to appear to me as a studio and tool for community building. Without having direct access to the site itself, we developed a pilot program to present the Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary proposal on a smaller scale at the Northside Workshop's home location.

NSW is located in a neighborhood adjacent to the Pruitt-Igoe site and consists of a two-story building, as well as green spaces that surround three sides of the building. In 2012, we built an apiary and raised garden beds, filled the workshop with art supplies, and began to host pilot programming called the Young Honey Crew. A studio practice began to take shape in the form of beekeeping and gardening. NSW was not only becoming a space for me to contemplate ideas for community-based projects, but also a platform for educational and social programming.



The Young Honey Crew was especially meaningful following the death of Mike Brown this summer and the protests happening in Ferguson and around the city. There was an overall feeling of distress during this time. Some students in the program particularly sought space to think and create, while others needed a place for dialogue. NSW was able to function as a sanctuary for contemplation. The workshops began to slowly evolve to become more about



community and collective thinking. I replaced the concept of teaching as an expert with encouraging students to explore ideas together with me during workshop time.



Over the past few months, the world has witnessed a huge collective spirit arise from a diverse group of people in Ferguson from all walks of life, artists, activists, educators, students and citizens, coming together in innovative ways to demand change. This local response to injustice here in Saint Louis sparked other neighborhoods to take action, which spread to other US cities and countries around the world calling for transformative change simultaneously. While the pursuit for justice continues, this movement has brought a new community together and been a living example of local action and the power of the human collective.



“These are the times to grow our souls. Each of us is called upon to embrace the conviction that despite the powers and principalities bent on commodifying all our human relationships, we have the power within us to create the world anew. We can begin by doing small things at the local level, like planting community gardens or looking out for our neighbors. That is how change takes place in living systems, not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously “ – Grace Lee Boggs

**Juan William Chávez** is an artist and cultural activist who explores the potential of space through creative initiatives that address community and cultural issues. His studio practice incorporates unconventional forms of beekeeping, agriculture, and architectural interventions that utilize art as a way of researching, developing and implementing socially-engaged and creative placemaking projects. He founded the Northside Workshop in 2010, a nonprofit art space dedicated to addressing cultural and community issues in North Saint Louis. He has received awards and grants from Creative Capital, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Art Matters and the Gateway Foundation. Chávez holds a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and a MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



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August 27, 2018 10:01 AM

Updated September 05, 2018 03:47 PM

*“A Tale of Two Cities” – a project the McColl Center for Art + Innovation proposed, aimed at engaging the voices of more neighbors, particularly those experiencing homelessness, in how the North Tryon Street area should be developed – won a \$350,000 grant from the national organization ArtPlace in late 2016. Since then, a number of artists have worked together with neighbors of the McColl Center. Juan Williams Chavez, an artist and cultural activist based in St. Louis, Mo., brought a curriculum on urban ecosystems to let students explore ideas and figure out what they think ought to happen in the community.*



**Describe your role in this particular project.** My role was to collaborate with Bree Stallings, lead teaching artist, and Trevor Hoskins, teaching chef at Behailu Academy, on developing a curriculum that empowered students through exploring the Charlotte urban ecosystem through the lens of bees/pollinators, food rights and by meeting community leaders that are activating green space with creative projects. The name of the class was called the Charlotte Young Honey Crew.



Learning about beekeeping, outside the Van Avery Culinary Arts Center at CPCC.

Darnell L. Vennie - Darnell L. Vennie, Central Piedmont Community College

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**What was the most surprising moment?** The Charlotte Young Honey Crew had several challenges, like finding the right beehives and community garden to visit. Bree has a lot of connections with the community and everyone she reached out to was so happy to help and loved the project. We visited a master gardener, Bernard Singleton, and students learned about the garden and had the opportunity to taste his famous black



garlic. The students also visited the beehives at CPCC’s Van Every Culinary Arts Building where they were able to wear bee suits and inspect the hives with one of the head chefs.



Behailu students and volunteers flank (beginning third from left) Juan William Chavez, Bree Stallings (Behailu’s lead teaching artist), Trevor Hoskins (culinary arts instructor) and master gardener Bernard Singleton.

Courtesy of Juan William Chavez

**What was the most meaningful moment for you?** The privilege of working and collaborating with Behailu Academy. Charlotte is so fortunate to have such an amazing organization that is doing smart and impactful work with such creativity. I have learned so much from the students, the teaching artists, and administration. It is truly a unique and special place.

**What about this project has changed your art or the way you approach your practice?** This project gave me validation for the studio research, process and curriculum that I have been developing over the past five years in St. Louis. The success of the project showed me that it’s designed for successful collaborations that celebrate a city’s ecosystem by highlighting the amazing people that are committed to community building.

**What about your part in this project did the best job, in your opinion, of lifting the**





Pedro Toledo-Lopez and the poster that stopped traffic.  
Juan William Chavez

**voices of the people who have not been heard from?** I feel the project gave the space and the opportunity for students to explore, experience, analyze and express how they feel about the urban ecosystem or access to urban green space. Throughout the whole



project, I kept thinking about the mission statement of “Lifting the voices of the people who have not been heard from.” In the last workshop, I presented a question: How can we share the information we have learned with others? And what is the message we want people to know? The workshop assignment was to take all the information that we have learned to create a unique statement by using keywords and drawings to create an activist poster. The poster would then be used to create a photo portrait or a selfie. One of the students, Pedro, created a beautiful drawing of a bee and flower with a simple statement of “more plants more bees.” We went outside to take the photo of him holding the poster and at that moment a person driving by in her car stopped and asked him if that sign said “more plants more bees” – and if so, she would like to help him promote his message. We were all shocked by the reaction. But it demonstrated that small actions do have an impact on lifting the voices of the people.

 **COMMENTS** 



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