

NOURISHING THE ROOT: TRANSFORMING THE URBAN ECOLOGIES OF CHICAGO

SEPAKE ANGIAMA AND EMMANUEL PRATT

Emmanuel Pratt is the cofounder and executive director of Sweet Water Foundation, an emerging community land trust in the heart of Chicago's South Side. Sweet Water Foundation's practice of regenerative neighborhood development is a creative social justice method that produces safe and inspiring spaces and curates healthy intergenerational communities that transform the ecology of once- "blighted" neighborhoods. Here Pratt speaks about reclaiming space and language, restituting and regenerating the land through skill sharing, and recognizing the need to collectively nourish the root as an act of radical awakening.

SEPAKE ANGIAMA: There are two things you've said about how language is appropriated and used in different ways that really struck me. The first has to do with the term *blight* and specifically *urban blight*. The second is the question of what *radical* means and its etymology. In your practice you relate both terms to the land.

EMMANUEL PRATT: So the term *blight* is actually borrowed from agriculture, referring to the death and decay of a crop so that it no longer sustains life. As cities began to evolve in the twentieth century, the term *blight* began to be used in reference to the process of economic devaluation and degradation of a property or neighborhood. If I'm not mistaken, Lewis Mumford was first recognized for using *blight* in reference to the process of urban decay. Others followed, using the term as a framework for understanding land economics, particularly during the rise of slums and the housing crisis during the Great Depression but more specifically with the influx of African Americans into northern cities during the Great Migration. African American neighborhoods in cities like Chicago were consistently identified as "blighted"—written off as spaces of concentrated poverty, plagued by decay, and ultimately in need of erasure and redevelopment. As urban renewal policies increasingly targeted these "blighted" neighborhoods, the practice of urban renewal very quickly and rightfully got the nickname "Negro removal" and ultimately gave rise to the nationwide practice of redlining.

So in every way our work at Sweet Water is a direct response to the ecology of absence that has been constructed from the application of this term *blight* to our neighborhoods and communities. Our work flips the concept of blight on its head by celebrating the abundance of life that exists in these same so-called blighted neighborhoods.

Over the past five years the team at Sweet Water Foundation has transformed four contiguous city blocks of empty spaces on the South Side into a place now known as the Perry Ave Commons. The work includes approximately three acres of urban farms and a large community garden, one formerly foreclosed home transformed into a community school space [Think-Do House], another abandoned home currently being transformed into a live-work space for apprentices and international networks of artists/designers [Reconstruction House], a greenhouse converted into a community-based woodshop and classroom space [Work-Shop], a shipping container converted into a learning laboratory and greenhouse [Think-Do Pod], and at the center of the Commons, situated directly on the Perry Ave Community Farm, is a large-scale, timber-frame mortise-and-tenon pavilion that serves as a central space for large community gatherings, cultural celebrations, and performing arts [Thought Barn].

From *blight* to *light* . . . This place has its own body of language celebrating the process of reconstruction and healing. Everything echoes the possibility of hope. There *grows* the neighborhood—calling into question the age-old saying “There goes the neighborhood.”

SA So part of what you’re doing is building better context for language. Can you also talk about the word *radical*?

EP Most people associate the term *radical* with extreme or terror—particularly in this political climate. We have to remind people that the actual definition of *radical* means “of or restoring to the root.”

SA Right. So do you relate to your practice as radical?

EP Very much so. The work of transforming empty spaces into a *place* over a period of time is ultimately about celebrating the active and emergent process of rerooting. The Perry Ave Commons is in an area that was directly impacted by the process of redlining. Most members of the community that we serve consistently face the prospect of being displaced and uprooted—through eviction, gentrification, slumlording, school closures, incarceration, and so on. Traditional capital flows are extremely limited within this neighborhood.

So instead of following conventional development patterns founded on single bottom-line returns on investment, the Perry Ave Commons offers an example of a regenerative and adaptive framework that maximizes the assets and skill sets that exist within the community. But that requires a localized understanding of how people are employed, an understanding of the complexities and context that they're dealing with and the in-between moments of informality, those interstitial spaces that renegotiate the connection back to the land and remaining rooted in place. Gardening and farming help literally and metaphorically to transform emptiness and voids into an active healing process responding to decades and generations of trauma. And as the aesthetics and the forms of the spaces and built environment evolve, so do the language and image of the place.

All of this requires a radical imagination.

SA This in-betweenness—the interstitial spaces where you find this informality—reminds me of something Jane Jacobs wrote about. She said that informal structures, although they might look like chaos or mess, have their own logic. So it's quite interesting how you relate the logic of the local to planning systems. That's also the case in Johannesburg. Architects try to plan informal structures. For example, they think about how buses come in and out of certain localities to take people from place to place. How do you plan for something like a market, which already has its own logic and its own way of doing things, and how does that fit into a more formalized structure?

EP Exactly. My favorite chapter from Jacobs's book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* [1961] is the final chapter. Perhaps it's the most overlooked chapter as well: "The Kind of Problem a City Is." Ultimately there's a localized familiarity of day-to-day operations, and you constantly have to translate, iterate, and introduce something new and allow space and time for feedback—

SA Right. It's a problem of not having that localized knowledge about space, time, and environmental conditions. So how do you think Sweet Water Foundation adapts to that way of thinking, which is much more about being responsive to place and people?

EP A place truly becomes a place only by allowing for a frequency of iterative and localized responses.

For example, gardening and farming offer initial ways to begin to bring people together to share stories, to work, to feed, to heal, to find out about family histories, medical conditions, and the real value of food to a community. But when

real, value-based transactions happen, real-world market relationships are formed, bonds are formed, and then bonds of trust are created. It is within the spaces of trust that place can be built.

SA So this wasn't necessarily a means of commodifying the land but was much more about a co-social transaction that was taking place.

EP It's about the reconnection.

SA Yes, but you also used the word *translation*. Could you explain what you mean by that?

EP There's a lived reality of existing in an area that doesn't have access to food, that doesn't have access to stable housing, doesn't have access to jobs. There are terms like *food desert* that are used externally. They're used in political jargon and in policy documents. But when you actually come to that site, there's an interesting gap between external perception and people who have been living like this for so long. It's just like the dated term *inner city*. It's been dated for decades, but it's still used—sometimes in order to say, “Well we've got to return some of these amenities back to these neighborhoods.”

Once it becomes recognized through research documents and money is poured in to study that situation, a term is codified. The terms then get placed into policy and popularized by mass media. Then the term gets introduced back into that neighborhood, and now everybody is talking about food deserts, but initially nobody was talking about food deserts, not locally.

SA It comes back to language.

EP It always comes back to language. This is critically important in my experience with architecture and the field of architecture; language is a way to create or crystallize a bond and trust with people, or it is used very divisively to alienate and can foster mistrust. Starting a conversation by saying, “Look, we want to put a garden into these lots,” is very different from saying, “I want to juxtapose the dynamics of the modular designed object with these interstitial third spaces.” People just don't know what you're talking about.

SA Do you think it creates a kind of cognitive dissonance?

EP Absolutely. And it creates a certain barrier to shared knowledge and understanding. When you put down a garden bed, that's cool, but if you put in a garden bed with this shape of a house on top of it, it becomes a sculptural

object. It calls into question the idea of putting only a garden there. Why don't you just put something there as a marker at the threshold of the neighborhood? We hand-raised a barn in the neighborhood [Thought Barn] in 2017 because so many people were coming and we felt that we needed a centralized gathering place and a public space for performances.

SA So the design followed a need?

EP Yeah, absolutely. But it also raises questions: like why is there a barn in the city now? Why is there a farm in the city? How often are there farms in the city? And then it goes back to the reality that there was once a fire, the great fire of 1871 in Chicago. There was a moment when people were like, "Oh, no more barns within city limits," because they were fire hazards. When we first said we were designing a barn, everybody asked, "Where are the farm animals? Where are the tractors?" We were like, "No, it's actually for people." They were like, "Well, what does that mean?" Come and join us for an event and meet other people. People suggested that it shouldn't be enclosed and should just stay open-air, so that people passing by could see what's going on and be engaged.

This structure is also a great way to talk about other cultures, other traditions. Going to the Greco-Roman and the Egyptian ways of building, where you have multiple people and hands carrying a thousand pounds and of course Amish barn raising. It's very much a dialogic approach, not a monolithic one.

SA Then you talk about a vision. Is it a collective or a shared vision? Where does that come from?

EP That's a very complicated question. I go back to Jane Jacobs and her last chapter on what kinds of problems cities are. She said we've got it wrong in diagnosing cities using one formulaic approach.

SA Sure.

EP We need another approach. So ours, which people initially said was crazy, is more of a call-and-response framework. It's historically black, like in church. You put something out there, and you leave a space for somebody to respond.

It's like the marches in Johannesburg—when the ANC [African National Congress] was preparing and then marching through the streets. There's a very distinct call-and-response, which activates collectivity. It's like, "Are you really ready for this? Let's be ready."

SA Right.

EP There's a joy and celebration of possibility. There's this crazy moment of hope where there might typically be lots of doubt, despair, concern. Trajectories of history have said, "No, it's not possible." And we're saying, "It is possible. Let's go!" Yeah, it's black.

SA To return to this notion of the "we," who does that "we" constitute for you?

EP The "we" constitutes the Sweet Water core team.

SA Who's that?

EP There are gardeners, farmers, carpenters, mentors, apprentices. It's very intergenerational. We have a group of elders in their fifties and older who have lived life in every way, shape, and form and are looking at this as a possibility for the future and for their legacy. They want to give back; they want to build up. Then they find themselves reflected in a lot of our youth.

We've also begun to introduce new partners who have helped build up the place, leading tours, sharing their language, sharing their stories, and bonding with people from outside. Then there's some space for respect for what has been built in the "blight," you know? Sure, we'll use that term, but it's not going to define who we are. So then all of a sudden the "we" might include a university student studying public policy. Four years later we have fellows. They come in fellowship. So the "we" is this kind of emergent "we."

SA Does it involve nonhumans?

EP Of course. The "we" is first and foremost formed by the regenerative aspects of our plants. Why do we refer to this place as an urban ecology? Because it is a way to think about us living symbiotically with the land. And serving one another and the land. Building up new objects or a new home that was revitalized from this old home from 1891. It's right across the street from the farm and right next to the garden, with lines of sight, just as Jane Jacobs described. You can experience the community as it emerges. We're designing new housing from the ground up that embeds the labor, the practice, the modularity, the ecological responsibility, all that—and it introduces a new way of thinking about capital. It would be enticing for someone buying a home, who can afford to celebrate their privilege, to come in and bond with the person next door who built this place in the noosphere—the collective space of human thought.

Some of the “we” are the people who died. We forget, and some of the “we” are the memories (photos, diaries, journals) that we’re finding in this house and piecing together. The people who lived here are informing how we’re now reconstructing the space.

SA That’s really beautiful.

This conversation was recorded in Chicago on March 14, 2019.