



Anjulie Rao

BIOGRAPHY

Anjulie Rao is a Chicago-based journalist and writer focusing on livable built environments, equitable design, architecture criticism, and radical urbanism. With an academic background in art history, she enjoys intersections between visual art, architecture, infrastructure, and political narratives. She received her MA in New Arts Journalism from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2014 and her bylines can be found in *Metropolis*, *Chicago Reader*, *American Craft Magazine*, *Chicago Magazine*, *Artsy*, *Curbed Chicago*, and *LUXE*, among others.

STATEMENT

I pose the question “how is public knowledge produced?” Within the field of architecture, I have found that that knowledge, appreciation, and continued support of the design practice is a function of writing for the public; the development of our cities as habitable, equitable spaces is produced through criticality—“If there’s bad art, burn it down,” as Dave Hickey says. But what seems to be sorely lacking is a conversation about emotion—feelings that are entwined in how we experience cities and the politics of how stuff is made and built and fed to us. It’s a crucial component of public knowledge often cut from word counts.

I speak about music and lyrical writing as a form of building public knowledge: To understand the world lyrically is to create space for clarity, for experimentation and play; in which knowledge, form, and confidence can be altered. To look at writing through the lens of the lyric, to follow music through writing, and to sing what one knows, these methodologies are at the core of producing a public that does more than “know;” they feel information compassionately and completely.

VOICES
OF
CHICAGO #5

How to Lose in Chicago

How to Lose in Chicago

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you
meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

(Octavia Butler, *The Art of Losing*)

Some days, a life in Chicago is a life of mastering loss. As a newcomer to the city I often found myself standing at one of six or eight or 10 or 100 street corners that intersect with six or eight or 10 or 100 other street corners. In Chicago, these quintessential intersections are called “six corners” but when you're fresh and new to the city, they often feel like a hall of mirrors. And, of course, we Chicagoans consider the loss of people, whether through the city's unfair reputation of violence or the “bleeding wound” of the hoards of Black and Brown families leaving the city, driven out by decades of inequity. Chicago's losses move into the material: on Twitter Chicagoans follow the accounts of individuals and organizations chronicling with intense detail the historic buildings that are to be wrecked by a developer's bulldozer. All this loss has driven us apart, taking a city divided by segregation and redlining and uneven investment and shredded it further, pitting preservationists against developers, renters against their aldermen, homeowners against density advocates — it goes on. Loss is everywhere, it is fought and felt, and deep within that pit of loss lies architecture.

Under Mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration, Chicago saw a relentless burst of quality design projects and a commitment to continuing his predecessor, Mayor Richard M. Daley's (1989-2011) pet project of transforming Chicago into our own *Paris sur Chicago River*. While Daley supervised the destruction of Chicago's public housing stock in the 2000 Plan for Transformation, racking up an unbearable tally of housing losses (18,000), Emanuel has touted the revitalization of public spaces, investment in cleaning our putrid river, expanding bicycling routes, and building neighborhood libraries. Also in his credentials: the Chicago Architecture Biennial (CAB), his brainchild, which melded his love for architecture with his salvation for increased tourism.

At the 2019 CAB opening event, press and Biennial stakeholders gathered at the Chicago Cultural Center to witness the launch of the next Biennial edition, to hear from curators Yesomi Umolu and Sepake Angiama. Making welcoming remarks was Emanuel, whose usual deadpan humor peppered the ho-hum air of press conferences. Someplace in the middle of his remarks, after gushing on about Chicago's architectural legacy, he noted that we have seen “foundational” works of architecture in our neighborhoods. Perhaps it was the contrast between that sense of beaming joy that comes from speaking about downtown Chicago's architectural “gems” and the pleading tone that the city sees value in our neighborhoods. But it was that word, “foundational” that locked my disappointment.

The word foundational is inherently architectural; in a building, it is the lowest point on which all else is built. It's often underground. In an idea, it is the load-bearing principle. It is a beginning; a point of departure from which all else can be elaborated.

I begrudgingly begin at the beginning, with the Michigan Avenue Bridge in downtown Chicago. On the bridge's south end tenderhouses, four relief sculptures commemorate the city's violent beginnings: the first panel, *The Discoverers*, depicts Louis Joliet and Jacques Marquette — the French-Canadian explorers who mapped the Mississippi River (Joliet is widely credited as a founder of Chicago) — as well as René-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, and Henri de Tonti — the 17th century explorers who charted the Great Lakes. The second panel, titled *The Pioneers*, depicts fur trader John Kinzie, dressed in his wares, guiding a group of

settlers toward their own Manifest Destiny. It would be inappropriate to not acknowledge the tyranny of westward expansion and the false claims to land made by explorers that land was free for the taking.

Defense, the third panel, presents as the most atrocious: it depicts the Battle of Fort Dearborn, an armed conflict between Native Americans and settlers in which the native peoples were responsible for nearly 70 settler deaths. In her radio piece “Four Corners,” writer Sarah Vowell describes the relief perfectly: “A wildly racist relief sculpture [...]. A soldier from the fort is kind of battling off this savage Indian brave while a mother and child are kind of cowering behind him, basically waiting to die. And underneath that is a plaque that says the people of the fort were brutally massacred by the Indians. They will be cherished as martyrs in our early history. What it doesn't say is that those Indians technically hadn't given over their rights to this land. But it looks like they ran out of room to put that on the plaque.” (1999)

The final panel, *Regeneration*, depicts workers rebuilding Chicago after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Chicagoans still celebrate this occasion like it was the birth of a nation: theater groups stage re-enactments of the fire by burning facsimiles of buildings on boats that cruise the Chicago river while audiences cheer. It is brought up in the endless fight to make housing more affordable; some of the arguably-unnecessary expenses related to Chicago's wild building code are meant to prevent fires like The Great One from recurring — 150 years later. Replace our city's flag with an image of Mrs. O'Leary's infamous cow flicking her

cigarette into a nearby pasture, which is said to have started the fire? We'll take it.

In four panels, we see a city's history in loss, images of men forging ahead to conquer and defend; murder and tragedy and the triumphant (white) human spirit. In each panel lies Chicago's foundation — geographic, civic, and architectural. Oddly, each scene is guarded or watched over by a different angel floating above them, perhaps to divine their stories as Chicago pushed on into a future of ongoing loss.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or next-to-last, of three loved houses went. The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I hesitate to jump so far into the present, as Chicago's recent past is colored by generations of disinvestment, segregation, and the intentional neglect of communities of color. But while the photos we see of the city's magnificent architectural marvels — the invention of the skyscraper and its tenacious re-re-reinvention that brought us the variety of Post-Modern, Minimalist, Brutalist, and Deco towers we see downtown — and the barrage of boat tour advertising (the tours are actually quite nice, you should try it), we see the exact opposite in our neighborhoods. Architecture critic and photographer Lee Bey uses a phrase that always piques my attention: “vast swaths,” he says, of the South and West sides emptying out; vacant buildings are demolished, leaving more vacancy. Beginning with the Plan for Transformation which displaced thousands of families under the still-false promise to rebuild, loss of equitable housing remains prominent. Social infrastructure like public schools also suffered a similar fate: under Emanuel's administration, more than 50 public schools were closed (most of which are located in Black and Brown neighborhoods), many left vacant, still. Couched in

this loss of housing, ironically, the few closed schools located in affluent areas have been transformed into luxury apartments, touting “authenticity” and “unique features.”

Stewart School, located in the rapidly-gentrifying Uptown neighborhood, closed in 2013. Today it is called “Stewart School Lofts,” and its features include chalkboards from classrooms and flooring taken from the gymnasium that still bears the school emblem. Images on the new development's website read less like marketing and more like a graveyard. In a powerful essay published in the *Chicago Reader* by Matt Harvey, a student who graduated from Stewart in 2012 and visited the newly-completed lofts, he wrote: “It was in this building that I played my first — and last — games of Johnny Come Across, and freeze tag, and Heads Up, Seven Up. It was in this building that I found my first crush, first girlfriend, and first kiss. Here, I won my first award, had my first fight, learned under the tutelage of some of my favorite teachers, and met lifelong friends. For nearly a decade of my life, this building was like a second home, and I had more seminal experiences here than in any other place I've ever stepped foot in. Today I wouldn't be capable of calling this place my home even if I wanted to.” (2018)

Paola Aguirre Serrano, founder of the urban planning firm Borderless Studio, has been working with the now-closed Overton Elementary school in Bronzeville for several years, collaborating with artists and designers to re-activate the space with installations and activities that foster optimism and community agency. She says, “School closures are a symptom of broader challenges related to spatial inequities, racial segregation, population loss, declining school-age population and too many school buildings, yet they represent an opportunity for creative and anticipatory planning

that equally values the process and the outcome.” For Serrano, the business-as-usual model like that of Stewart disregards the original pathos inherent in a neighborhood school. Instead the building is just a shell, ripe for hideous redevelopment. Where there was once life we've created market value; where there has been vacancy we've created anxiety.

Chicago has seen greater investment in leisure infrastructure and Rahm's version of “foundational” works of neighborhood architecture. The 606, a 2.7-mile elevated recreation trail located between the Bucktown (on the east) and Humboldt Park (on the west) neighborhoods, is certainly one of those. A long-abandoned elevated rail line was transformed into a lush running and walking trail, spotted with formal and informal gathering spaces, public art, and play structures. Costing \$90 million in total (\$30 million per mile of trail), the horizontal park is widely used and loved, attracting over a million visitors in its first year of operation. As a work of design and landscape architecture, it is a community asset. Yet as a piece of leisure infrastructure the project has had far more sinister impacts: it has spurred enormous property value increases, allowing for rents to rise and housing prices to skyrocket on the western side of the trail.

While Bucktown gentrified long ago, Humboldt Park has long been a neighborhood characterized by its strong Puerto Rican population that has fought tirelessly against gentrifying forces. The park's enormous steel Puerto Rican flags that mark the neighborhood's gateway serve as a welcoming gesture and a reminder of the long, sometimes unsuccessful battles many

Puerto Ricans in Chicago fought to remain in their former neighborhood of Lincoln Park.

For those who relocated, homeownership became more feasible and residents were thus shielded from some of the slow-creeping development making its way inside. That is, until 2012 when the 606 broke ground when the west side of the trail (Humboldt Park) saw single-family home prices increase by 48%, according to the study “Measuring the Impact of The 606” by DePaul University's Institute for Housing Studies. When the trail opened in 2015, housing prices rose an additional 9.8%. Gentrification continued to be spurred by housing sales, demolitions, and Chicago's history of sweeping downzoning to prohibit density across many of the city's neighborhoods. Today the neighborhood is becoming unaffordable to many renters and longtime property owners are seeing unanticipated and unfeasible property tax hikes due to their proximity to the 606.

It's a small but vital case study of gains and losses in Chicago, and a symptom of a much greater problem: a short-sightedness in architecture and design. Rahm, touting his foundational works of architecture, did not seem to comprehend that these gains are based on prosperity created from loss. Rather than integrating new design initiatives with policy-based infrastructure that would prevent the displacement of communities who had rooted themselves in their neighborhoods (rent control, upzoning, designated affordable housing), we kept the nice architecture and let the rest to work itself out. In an already-segregated Chicago, architecture is tearing us apart. When we seek to preserve

those values of design, what are we actually preserving?

I forgot the prairie because it stood so still. I forgot the clouds because they were always moving. I forgot the taste of water because it lay quietly inside the taste of everything.

I forgot the childhood when it disappeared through a hole in itself. Later, mushrooms emerged from its damp soil.

The way to keep something is to forget it. Then it goes to an enormous place.

Grass grows to the horizon like hair. In the sky a cloud goes on naming and unnamng itself.

(Jenny George, *Mnemonic*)

I've never fully trusted history — nor should you. History is dangerous, as its narrator is never reliable. It makes us into liars. In Chicago, our history makes us look like picky thieves: we choose the parts that treat us softly; unlike cities like Richmond, Virginia or New Orleans, Louisiana, that are dotted with monuments to confederate separatists who fought and died for the right to own the bodies of Black slaves, Chicago has just one statue, a monument to Balbo — a gift from Mussolini to the city. There have been protests for its removal yet the true monuments to Chicago's past racism lay in plain sight.

Our monuments aren't like statues, characterized by narrative. Instead we have cherished works of architecture that are cleaned and polished and preserved with the utmost care. The campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) is known for its collection of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe buildings, notably Crown Hall. Dotting the

grounds in a perfect Miesian grid, the squat minimalist structures are celebrated by international visitors and beloved by locals. New buildings are added to honor and respect the grid; from atop the Rem Koolhaas-designed El platform, the campus resembles a board game. Each piece is in place.

IIT is located in the historic Bronzeville neighborhood, known for its significant role in the development of jazz — an epicenter of Black culture. The Great Migration of the early 1900s brought thousands of Black migrants to Chicago, where they settled in Bronzeville and established what was known as the “Black Metropolis.” One building in particular stood as a monument to the thriving arts and cultural community, Mecca Flats. Designed in 1981 by Willoughby Edbrooks and Franklin Pierce Burnham (no relation to Daniel Burnham), the building resembled what Chicagoans know as a “courtyard” building: a long, U-shaped structure with an enclosed courtyard and 170-foot atrium ceilings. Balconies opened up onto the atrium, allowing for informal social space. The building was surrounded by plentiful outdoor gathering spaces as well, making it a rich, vibrant place for artists, musicians, and poets to gather, notably the renowned Poet Laureate, Gwendolyn Brooks. While much of the building was occupied by white tenants through 1910, the populations became predominantly Black, blue-collar workers by 1920. In 1938, Mies joined the IIT faculty, and in 1941, IIT took control over Mecca Flats (cf. Sherry Tierney, *Rezoning Chicago's Modernisms*, 2011).

IIT President Henry Townley Herald (1940-1952) saw the growing Black population at Mecca Flats as blight, desiring its destruction. Gradually, the building was starved out; IIT refused to maintain the building. They refused to install legally-required sprinkler systems or manage cockroach infestations.

They began gradually lowering rents to ensure that poorer tenants replaced the blue-collar workforce that moved out due to decaying conditions. Once vacated, the building was torn down in 1941 with support from a federal slums-clearance program. Herald's successor, John Rettallata, remarked in a 1954 speech to The Chicago Club: “You have probably examined today the model of the proposed new building which has been designed by Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe... It will be the successor to another building at that place which we demolished a few years ago because it did not fit the needs of our industrial era, the once-famous Mecca Flats.” That Mies building that would replace a home for working-class Blacks was Crown Hall.

To memorialize the once-thriving Black Metropolis, several six-foot stones and obelisks stand on the boundaries of the IIT campus, each telling a part of the neighborhood's storied past. They are vital monuments to this history but they exist in targeted loss. Author Sherry Tierney writes: “The adoption of Mies' language of architectural modernism [...] abolished 120 acres of sidewalk cafes, homes, and businesses of the Black Metropolis that were the incubator of Chicago's Renaissance. [...] This renaissance was based on the cultural production of Black artists, musicians and writers. While the work of these artists is archived [...] it can never be restored to its original vibrance that was lost to IIT's wrecking ball.” Yet this inhumane story doesn't end there: in 2018, a maintenance crew discovered artifacts from Mecca Flats buried underground; household and personal items as well as colorful tiles and bits of infrastructure from the building's basement. After several months of excavation,

IIT launched the Mecca Flat Artifact Conservation Fund campaign, raising money to preserve and catalogue the recovered items and place them on display at Crown Hall without recognizing their role in the building's demise — the Cheshire smile of irony at its best.

Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise
Sit there the light corrupts your face
Mies Van der Rohe retires from grace
And the fair fable fall.

(Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*)

Perhaps I'm mischaracterizing Chicago in this essay; I don't mean to note that Chicago is, in any way, lost, or that the city's architecture as object or practice is solely responsible for the cultural or economic losses seen and felt by its citizens. Rather, that participating in the built environment — whether as designer, planner, consumer, or critic — we must begin to re-imagine how the built environment could ever, possibly, function outside of a normative system of market capital.

I think often of a current agenda item on Chicago's civic docket: whether or not the city should designate a segment of the Pilsen neighborhood as a Landmark District. Preservationists are asking for this district to preserve the neighborhood's architectural stock — one that is distinct for its Eastern European-built “Bohemian Baroque” styles but has been occupied by a majority working-class Mexican population for almost five decades. Today its flourished buildings include hundreds of unique, colorful murals that tell the story of its current residents and made it attractive to young artists (along with the

low rents). Its highly-walkable neighborhood and vibrant business district make it an area that has continued to attract younger, white and increasingly affluent residents. Certainly the neighborhood is being gentrified with second- and third-wave white populations, and locals are being displaced due to rising rents. Residents are concerned that landmarking Pilsen will cause rents to rise further and create burdens for existing home and building owners to comply with rigid aesthetic requirements. Yet the question of landmarking the neighborhood is not being posed as a means to preserve the inhabiting population and all its contributions to neighborhood character; rather, it seeks to preserve building stock by using the cultural capital generated by the Mexican residents (murals, ambiance, civic cohesion) as a darling for its argument.

Cases like that of Pilsen are challenging because, like many cities, Chicago cannot seem to separate good design from economic growth unless that design is done charitably; we cannot envision our city's architectural heritage and ongoing social infrastructure investments operating outside of generating economic capital. We will happily preserve Pilsen's murals because they raise property values; we preserve their Bohemian Baroque buildings for the sake of the building — not because people live there. In her book *The Neighborhood that Never Changes*, author Japonica Brown-Saracino argues for social preservation — a vastly different way of looking at systems of power, preservation, and displacement in communities. “Social preservation,” she states, “asks us to attend to how an ideology and set of practices complicate economic revitalization processes as well as personal and financial gains [...] In this sense, it calls us to consider culture for culture's sake because social preservation is a value rational, or at least driven by less instrumental goals than those we typically

associate with gentrifiers.” (*A Neighborhood that Never Changes: Gentrification, Social Preservation, and the Search for Authenticity*, 2009). Those instrumental goals, she notes, are competition for resources and development for personal gain.

Now I'm no expert in revitalization or development, but I believe that writing about architecture makes one an expert on the void that is left by losing what you once had and loved. Losing in Chicago means adhering to short-sightedness and to architecture-as-capital, and leaving the void once filled unnamed. Serrano, in her work, asks: “Could we think of former school sites more as capacity-building processes for their communities instead of mere real-estate transactions?” I propose we broaden this question to encompass all Chicago development; that when we decide to build new housing, tear down the old, or invest in social and leisure infrastructures, Chicagoans must consider growth outside of normative capitalistic prosperity by understanding that our architectural and civic “gains” have historic roots in loss. To begin that process of decommodification we must recognize how development has easily camouflaged as “investment” or “revitalization” with foresight, and develop language to describe precisely how loss is felt physically and emotionally within our communities. We have to name it, reckon with it, and write it like a disaster. ■