Activists and artists hatch a plot to publicize the failings of the CHA's Plan for Transformation.

By Martha Bayne

If you happened to be outside City Hall on the morning of May 27, you probably didn’t look twice at the two yellow-vested guys installing a new advertisement in the JC Deaux bus shelter at Randolph and LaSalle. Not many people did, including the mayor who pulled up and idled nearby. Not many people did, including the mayor who pulled up and idled nearby. Not many people did, including the mayor who pulled up and idled nearby.

But the poster the workers slid swiftly into place didn’t tout the merits of Vertzon, Altoids, or the iPod. “Are Tourists More Important Than the Poor?” asked the tagline over photos of Mayor Daley and the Bear. “If the mayor has the energy to raise $450 million for Millennium Park,” read the text, “shouldn’t he also be able to raise money for Chicago families in urgent need of affordable housing? Who will hold him accountable for this? A line at the bottom directed the curious to a Web site: chicagohousingauthority.net.

The poster was part of a guerrilla ad campaign created by a group of artists and activists to draw public attention to the failings of the CHA’s Plan for Transformation—the agency’s sweeping $1.6 billion, ten-year plan to demolish the decrepit high-rises that founded the CHA in HUD receivership in 1995 and move as many as 20,000 residents into lower-riser, mixed-income buildings and the private market. The bright orange bus-shelter posters—there were 15 in all, bearing five different messages—and hundreds of smaller placards installed on Blue, Green, Orange, and Red Line trains meticulously mimicked the CHA ads that popped up all over town late last year. Those ads, she says, were “really slick.” But they “only tell like 2 percent of the experience that people have when having the plan.”

Charlotte (all the participants’ names have been changed at author.net) had all been involved in collaborative public art projects protesting gentrification and the privatization of public space. Most hadn’t worked together before but they’d been kickstarting plans to collaborate. “The majority of our first conversations always came back to these parallel things going on with the CTA. It ended up making all of this money and resources on how to deal with it.”

Though many of the CHAs original ads were installed in and around existing public housing developments, the consensus among activists is that the campaign was aimed less at making residents feel OK about the relocation process and more toward convincing their future neighbors that public housing residents aren’t all drug dealers and gangbangers. “The perception of the wider public is that our residents are not someone they want to be next to,” CHA board chair Sharon Gist said.

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ly—“doomed to continued failure.”

Hot on the heels of the Sullivan report, hundreds of residents signed on
to class action lawsuit (Wallace v. CHA) charging that the agency
failed to follow through on its man-
dates for tenants moved into inte-
grated, financially stable communities. It was
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Kothari, the UN Special Rapporteur
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More recently, the agency got hit with
an embarrassing one-two punch from the dailies. In April the Sun-
Times reported that CHA contrac-
tors had contributed more than
$250,000 to the 17th Ward
Democratic organization over the
past three years. There’s no public
housing in the southwest-side ward,
but CHA CEO Terry Petersen lives
there and served as its alderman
from 1996 to 2000. Then in May the
Tribune published a lengthy report
on widespread failures in the
agency’s administration of Section 8
vouchers—the rent subsidies
designed to help public housing resi-
dents find housing in the private
market. Analysis of 230,000 CHA records revealed that Section 8 land-
lords had failed four out of every ten
inspections over the last five years. Chicagoans displaced from public
housing were ending in buildings
that often contained dangerous levels
of flaking lead paint, were infested
with vermin, and lacked electricity,
heat, plumbing, or all three.

The CHA’s attorneys said they
acted extra care to get their facts straight
and steet clear of hyperbole. Still, the
ads are provocative. “Do Money and
Politics Mix?” says the poster bearing
Terry Petersen’s likeness. The text
that follows describes the Plan for
Transformation as “disastrous” and
characterizes contractors’ contri-
butions to the 17th Ward Democratic
organization as a quid pro quo for
CHA contracts. Developer Dan
McLean, a partner in the mixed-income
housing that’s gone up in Cabrini-Green, is slammed as “one of
several developers who are destroy-
ing affordable housing and getting
rich doing it.”

“In theory, it was a really good line,” says Janet Smith, a member of
the Coalition to Protect Public Housing
and codirector of the Nathalie P.
Voorhees Center for Neighborhood
Development at UIC. “There’s an
edge to this that if you read it and
you didn’t know who these people
are that are being profiled, you’d be
drawn in, but when I read it I don’t
see anything that makes it a farce or
reduces its credibility.”

They were also careful to cover their
asses, setting up a separate cell phone
number to serve as a hotline and reg-
istering their Web site to a nonexist-
ent address. They estimate that about
50 percent of the $250,000 contributed with the project in one form or another; but
in the tradition of deregulated activism
acting on their own, the group remains
loose and horizontally and constantly
changing,” says Charlotte.

The installation itself was
smoothly. Around 8:30 that
morning a team took off from the loft
in a loose arc from 39th and King
Drive to California and Milwaukee.)
When they hopped out of the car on
 Humbard, under Michigan Avenue,
they donned the yellow safety vests.
As they moved purposefully across the
chaos, the comments of his roommate, who’d
seen the placards on the Blue Line
and thought they were legit. “She was,
like, ‘What is, like, the CHA thinking?
This is the stupidest campaign ever!’”

While the activists were talking the
hotline rang. Charlotte answered it
and moved into the kitchen to talk.
When she returned she shook her
head and laughed. “That was Eric
Klinenberg,” she said. Klinenberg, a
sociologist whose 2002 book Heat
Waves offered a blistering critique of
the city’s response to the 1995 heat
emergency that killed as many as 739
people, had been sent the link to the
Web site by a friend.

“In 1995 the city spent so much
time on spin that it failed to generate
the kind of policy responses that could
save lives.” Klinenberg says, “I’m wor-
rried the same thing is happening now.”

Over the summer months the
CHA’s group plans to keep push-
ing buttons. They’ve been collecting
testimonials from people whose
roads out of public housing haven’t
been as smooth as those depicted in
the Burnett campaign, but they’re
not looking to get them into trou-
ble. So they’re at work devising
other, more lawful tactics. “We real-
ly just want to get other people’s
reactions and open up more space
for the conversation to continue,”
says one participant.

“Maybe this won’t elicit the scale
of response that we want,” says another.
“But someone else will pick it up and
do it better. And then someone
else will pick that up, and do it even better than before.”

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