

Our Town

[snip] **A time to worry.** "I've been involved in a number of fields where there's a lay opinion and a scientific opinion," Princeton engineering professor Robert Socolow tells the *New Yorker's* Elizabeth Kolbert. "And, in most of the cases, it's the lay community

that is more exercised, more anxious. If you take an extreme example, it would be nuclear power, where most of the people who work in nuclear science are relatively relaxed about very low levels of radiation. But, in the climate case, the experts—the

people who work with the climate models every day, the people who do ice cores—they are *more* concerned. They're going out of their way to say, 'Wake up! This is not a good thing to be doing.'" —Harold Henderson | hhenderson@chicagoreader.com

Mischief

Fighting Spin With Spin

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 Decaux bus shelter at Randolph and LaSalle. Not many people did, including the cops who pulled up and idled nearby. But the poster the workers slid swiftly into place didn't tout the merits of Verizon, Altoids, or the iPod. "Are Tourists More Important Than the Poor?" asked the tagline over photos of Mayor Daley and the Bean. "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 chaos?" 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 landed the CHA in HUD receivership in 1995 and move as many as 20,000 residents into low-rise, 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, done pro bono by Leo Burnett as part of a PR campaign valued at \$1.5 million, graphically fused the CHA initials with the word *change* to read *CHAnge*. The fake ads bore a similar white-and-gray logo that read *CHAos*. Early that morning a dozen sleepy-



Bus shelter near City Hall with mock ad featuring CHA head Terry Peterson; the one featuring the mayor

looking men and women had gathered at a west-side loft to put their plan, four months in the making, into action. Around a dining room table cluttered with laptops, video monitors, coffee cups, bananas, and a crusty tub of hummus, some fiddled with VCRs and made last-minute changes to the Web site. On the floor others scored posters to the dimensions of the JC Decaux ad panels. Four of the men were kitted out in nondescript blue pants, work boots, and black hoodies and caps. One guy who'd worn a full beard the day before had shaved down to a Ditka-esque mustache.

"We need to go!" he said. "Where's the box? The white box?"

"It's at my house," said another man.

"That's why I called last night—"

"Fuck!"

"We'll get it. Here's my keys."

"Argh. We need to leave *now*."

Charlotte (all the participants' names have been changed at their request) says she "was truly horrified" when she first saw one of the Leo Burnett CHA ads in January,

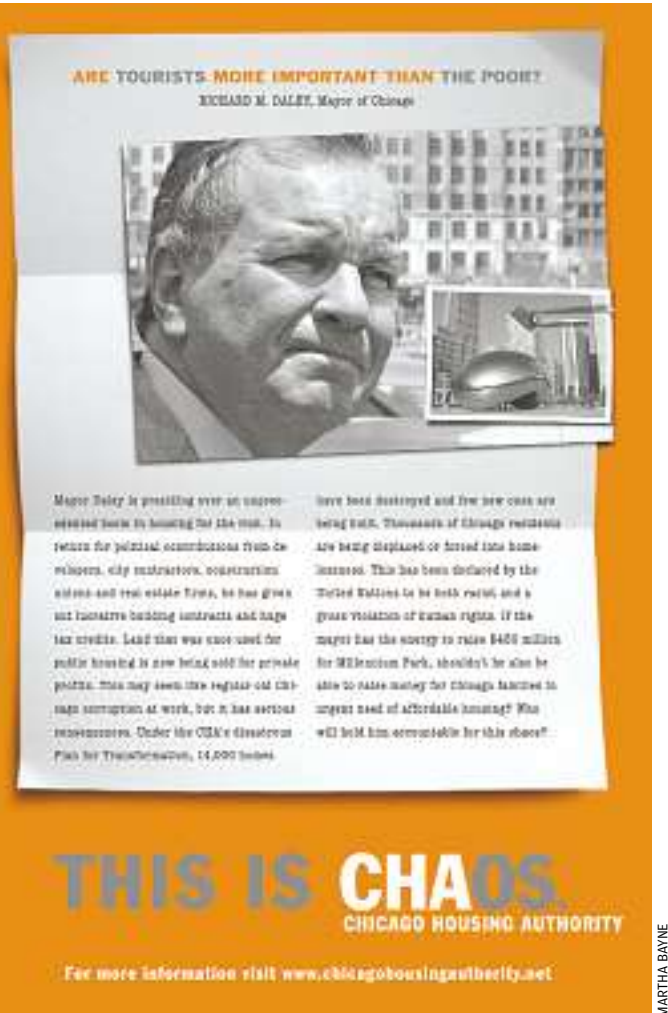
on the bus on her way to a teaching job. It featured a testimonial from a former CHA resident named Latoya Wolfe, a Columbia College student and aspiring novelist described as "determined to defy the Robert Taylor stereotype" and "thrilled" when the first Taylor high-rises came down. Some of Charlotte's students lived in public housing, and she was seeing and hearing quite a different story. The ads, she says, were "really slick." But they "only tell like 2 percent of the experience that people are having with the plan."

Charlotte and the others behind CHAos had all been involved in culture jamming in the past. Many of their public art projects protested gentrification and the privatization of public space. Most hadn't worked together before but they'd been kicking around plans to collaborate. "The majority of our first conversations always came back to these parallel things around privatization and things that are going on around Chicago specifically," says Charlotte. "We were all really interested in what's going on

with Renaissance 2010 [the CPS's ten-year plan for the schools] and what's going on with the CTA. It ended up making a lot of sense when this specific thing came up. We felt like we knew how to deal with it."

They decided one good way to fight the CHA's public relations efforts was with more PR, says Mike, the guy with the mustache. "They're spending all this money and resources on this campaign because they feel they need to rewrite the script. That's something that's clearly a weak spot."

Though many of the CHA's 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 Gilliam was quoted as saying in the



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[snip] **Will the federal courts save the states from themselves?** According to stateline.org, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, in Cincinnati, recently struck down a deal in which Ohio would exempt DaimlerChrysler from property taxes for ten years if it would upgrade a Jeep plant in Toledo. —HH

Tribune. “You really need a way to raise people’s perceptions.” At its 2003 annual meeting the housing authority approved the purchase of \$200,000 worth of ad space “to improve the image of the CHA.” That figure was later bumped to \$600,000.

But it’s not just public housing residents who have an image problem. The Plan for Transformation has been dogged by criticism since it was implemented in 1999. A 2003 report by former U.S. attorney Thomas Sullivan, hired by the CHA as an independent monitor, confirmed what residents, activists, and public policy researchers had been saying for years: the plan wasn’t working. Buildings were being demolished too quickly; residents were being forced to move in a hurry, into other, barely habitable CHA units, or into segregated, high-poverty neighborhoods that were as bad as or worse than the ones they’d left. They weren’t receiving adequate counseling or other desperately needed services. The plan was underfunded, understaffed, and—unless things changed drastically—“doomed to continued failure.”

Hot on the heels of the Sullivan report, hundreds of residents signed on to a class action lawsuit (*Wallace v. CHA*) charging that the agency failed to follow through on its mandate to relocate tenants into integrated, financially stable communities. It was settled March 15, and the CHA agreed to overhaul its relocation programs, but that wasn’t before Miloon Kothari, the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, had flown to Chicago and declared the whole state of affairs a human rights crisis.

More recently, the agency got hit with an embarrassing one-two punch from the dailies. In April the *Sun-Times* reported that CHA contractors 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 Peterson 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 residents 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 up in buildings that often contained dangerous levels of flaking lead paint, were infested with vermin, and lacked electricity, heat, plumbing, or all three.

The CHAos activists say they took extra care to get their facts straight and steer clear of hyperbole. Still, the ads are provocative. “Do Money and Politics Mix?” says the poster bearing Terry Peterson’s likeness. The text that follows describes the Plan for Transformation as “disastrous” and characterizes contractors’ contributions 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 destroying affordable housing and getting rich doing it.”

“They walked 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 their credibility.”

They were also careful to cover their asses, setting up a separate cell phone number to serve as a hotline and registering their Web site to a nonexistent address. They estimate that about 50 people have been involved with the project in one form or another, but in the tradition of decentralized activism, the organization remained “loose and horizontal and constantly changing,” says Charlotte.

The installation itself went smoothly. Around 8:30 that morning a team took off from the loft and headed downtown, posters under their arms and a videographer in tow. (A second team headed south a half hour later to distribute posters in a loose arc from 39th and King Drive to California and Milwaukee.) When they hopped out of the car on Hubbard, under Michigan Avenue, they donned the yellow safety vests.

After a snag getting the poster hung in the first shelter, across from Tribune Tower, they settled into a

rhythm. One man unlocked the glass panel protecting the underlying ad with a hex-head Allen key—available at any well-stocked hardware store—and the other slid the existing ad out of the track at the top and rolled it into a tube as the first replaced it with a CHAos poster. They moved purposefully across the Michigan Avenue bridge to Millennium Park, then west to City Hall. It was a bright, cheery morning. Commuters hurried out of the el; vets hawked poppies on the corner; a security guard rolled by on a Segway. Not only did no one challenge them, only a handful of passersby seemed to notice that the materials they left behind were anything out of the ordinary. They were back at the loft less than two hours after they’d left. Mike immediately shaved his mustache.

“It was easy,” he said. “After the first one it just felt like we were doing our job.” While they were gone those who’d stayed behind had finished setting up what was now a media center. Televisions and VCRs were tagged “WGN,” “NBC,” “CBS.” They were primed to record any coverage of the event that might make the midday news, but at that point the only thing on the air was an episode of Maury Povich titled “Desperate Housewife Makeovers.”

A week later a half-dozen people regrouped to hit the streets with copies of a pamphlet containing smaller, clip-and-save versions of the bus-shelter posters. They still hadn’t made the networks and, as expected, all the posters had been removed from the bus shelters—most by midafternoon the same day. (The one at 39th and Drexel was rumored to have stayed up through the long weekend, but it was gone when I checked on June 2.) A brief item about the action had aired on WBEZ, however, and another short piece had run in *NewCity*. The CHAos press release had been picked up by Gapers Block, Chicago IndyMedia, and a dozen other Web sites. Their own site—which includes downloadable PDFs of both the CHAos materials and the original CHAnge campaign, plus photos and video of the installation, information about the Plan for Transformation, and extensive links to other housing-related resources—had attracted 528 hits. And the group’s Google ranking (in a search for “Chicago Housing Authority”) had jumped to 21. Those

checking out the site apparently included the CHA, whose general counsel sent a letter to the group’s Internet provider objecting to the improper registration and demanding that it take immediate action.

Back at HQ, one participant relayed the comments of his roommate, who’d seen the placards on the Blue Line and thought they were legit. “She was, like, ‘What is 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 Wave* 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



On the el

save lives,” Klinenberg says. “I’m worried the same thing is happening now.”

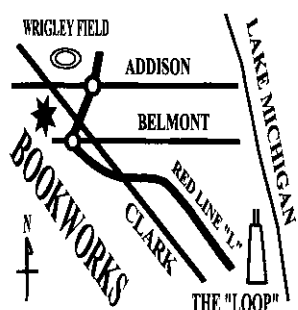
Over the summer months the CHAos group plans to keep pushing buttons. They’ve been collecting testimonials from people whose roads out of public housing haven’t been as smooth as those depicted in the Burnett campaign, but they’re not looking to get them into trouble. So they’re at work devising other, more lawful tactics. “We really 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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