

# READER

## ARTS & CULTURE

# Biennial as experimentation

*At the helm of this year's Chicago Architecture Biennial, the Floating Museum invites us all to be participants.*

by **Anjolie Rao**

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Floating Museum's Jeremiah Hulsebos-Spofford, Avery R. Young, Faheem Majeed, and Andrew Schachman at the Chicago Cultural Center

Credit: Cory Dewald

In 2017, a barge drifted along the Chicago River. It wasn't carrying the usual Ozinga concrete or gravel; **instead it floated a museum**. Produced by the Floating Museum, an interdisciplinary

collective comprised of architect Andrew Schachman, artists Faheem Majeed and Jeremiah Hulsebos-Spofford, and poet avery r. young, the museum barge showcased artwork from dozens of local and national artists. But for those lingering along the Chicago Riverwalk, the barge's approach was announced by song: every Wednesday night, the group would float up the river, transporting a chorus led by young. For weeks the floating chorus practiced, until its official debut at the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial (CAB), when crowds arrived to see the barge dock and to "visit" the museum. But what the Floating Museum found wasn't a crowd of visitors; it was a full-throated public chorale, made up of Chicagoans who had learned the song throughout previous weeks' rehearsals. Through rehearsal, the public became not observers, but participants.

Today, the Floating Museum has ascended from participants to artistic directors of the 2023 edition of the CAB, which opens September 21. Borrowing from their experience in 2017, they've named this year's biennial theme, "This Is a Rehearsal." Expanding on their experience transforming public visitors into participants, the team has theorized an entire philosophy around what it means to live in, build, and partake in city life: that everything we do, from building parks and offices, to walking along the river at dusk, is a *rehearsal*. Cities are not static spaces, despite our use of brick and concrete—materials of permanence. Instead they are open to trial and error, failure, and experimentation. Similar to rehearsing a musical performance, the 2023 CAB will be a testing ground for local organizations to try out new ideas and initiatives, and to explore rehearsal itself as a mechanism for building civic life.

Producing a biennial as a testing ground goes against what many other art and architecture biennials seek to accomplish; too often biennials exist to declare where a particular field is heading, or to take the temperature of the most prominent ideas and practitioners in those fields. What ends up being produced, Schachman said, is a manifesto, something the Floating Museum views skeptically.



CAB participant Edra Soto's Screenhouse project in Millennium Park

Credit: Andrew Glatt

“Instead of thinking what a biennial could say, or proclaim, it seemed more interesting to think about what a biennial could do as a relational machine, as a way to think together, a kind of feedback loop for an entire region, or city, or discipline,” he said. “Pretending like we have answers to things that we don’t have answers to—especially now, there’s so much ecological, political, economic uncertainty—it would be foolish to start making proclamations.”

The team has assembled 80 international participants—artists, architects, performers, and more—who will work with local organizations and individuals to respond to the theme in neighborhoods across the city. One example cited by the team comes from the Urban Growers Collective, a Black- and women-run nonprofit farm on the south side, which will be paired with the Living, a New York-based research and design practice. The Living has been experimenting with using biodegradable materials like agricultural waste and mycelium “glue” to construct structures—an apt pairing for Urban Growers Collective which, according to Majeed, is looking to build a pavilion to host an upcoming artist residency. These strategic pairings are designed to be responsive to community or organizational needs. Rather than existing as temporary installations that come down after the biennial ends, they are designed for long-term use as a means to test out these responses. Young called this a “revolutionary” shift from commission to conversation; these interventions are designed to be useful to those communities. Failure and recalibration will be embraced as opportunities. This is not a typical ethos found in architecture and urban planning—in

those fields, strategies originate from top-down authorities and manifest literally in concrete. But, Majeed said, these too are in some ways rehearsals.

“If you step back, cities are being built and they’re being torn down. The mayor comes in, does **INVEST South/West**, and then the next mayor comes in with another initiative, and the next, and so on,” he explained. “They may put on this show, like, ‘We have all the answers.’ But in four years, we’re gonna have a different initiative. It’s that pragmatic aspect of what we’re talking about. It’s like, let’s call that out and leverage it as a strength versus a failure or flaw.”

Reconsidering city-making as a state of rehearsal could inform new methods and strategies for grappling with what role the biennial could play in the Chicagos yet-to-be. It’s a different philosophy from past editions—from the inaugural 2015, “The State of the Art of Architecture,” and its bold proclamations claiming to put a pin in the field and practice of architecture, to the recent 2021 edition, “The Available City,” which spotlighted the city’s plentiful and questionably available vacant land. CAB 5 will also take on a different format. Unlike past years, the festival will officially “open” on September 21 to Chicagoans, launching programs and unveiling installations; it won’t open nationally to press and visitors until November 2.

CAB 5 will also return to the Chicago Cultural Center after taking a short hiatus from having a downtown presence in 2021. There, visitors can expect a range of exhibitions that deal directly with rehearsal itself. Production designer Ruth De Jong, who leads set design for Jordan Peele, will create an installation related to her work on Peele’s *Nope*. There will also be installations by visual artist Andrea Carlson, who will present an installation that speaks to what Schachman called “the long history of the land.” Each floor will feature practitioners who reckon with rehearsal through history, performance, landscape, capitalism, and more.

The vision for “This Is a Rehearsal” promises to unlock the layered complexities of living in and building cities that are overlooked in the search for “solutions.” The artistic team, instead, wants us to consider imagination—how residents and city officials alike might imagine and experiment with the city itself. Young wants to see train cars become concert venues—a “concert on the way to a concert,” he exclaimed. We can imagine rebellious uses for alleyways as night markets or art galleries, viaducts as stages for performances—interventions that capture what Chicago is in this precise moment. There is playfulness and possibility at the heart of rehearsal, and when CAB 5 opens in just a few short weeks, Chicagoans should again join the chorus with their own strategies to practice just what it means to inhabit, play, and assert their place in the city.

### **📍 Chicago Architecture Biennial**

Opens 9/21, various locations throughout the city. Visit [chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org](https://chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org) for more info.

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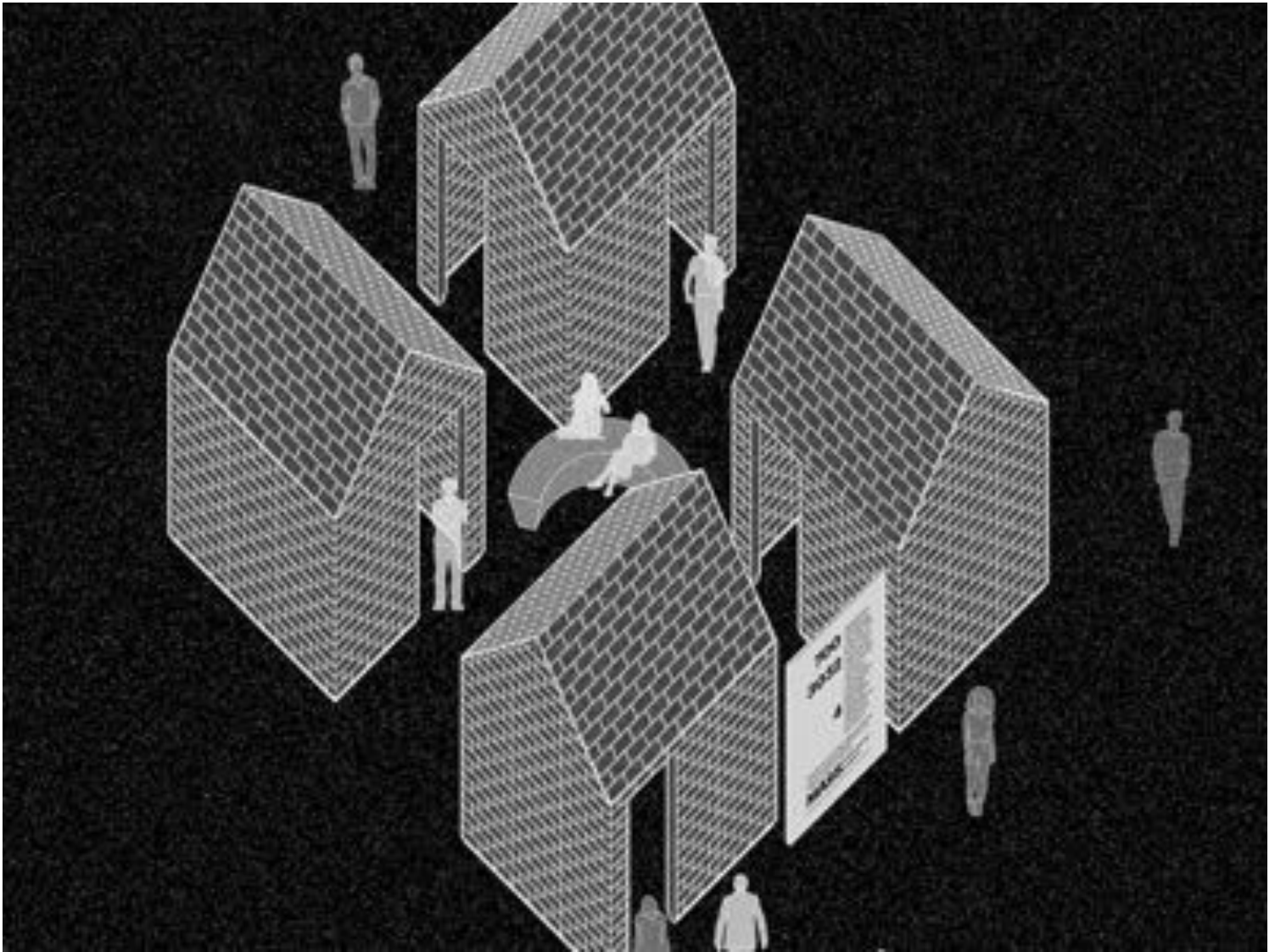
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