

MAKING PUBLIC

SPACE

*Personal*



Artist and "Before I Die" creator Candy Chang transforms space through curiosity and humanity—and will teach delegates of MPI's World Education Congress to do the same.

BY JASON HENSEL

FREE STICKERS!  
I WISH THIS WAS

Before I die...

TREVOR COE





One of her early public space projects started conversations about rental differences among New York City residents. Another project had people post “I Wish This Was \_\_\_\_\_” stickers—styled after “Hello, My Name is” badges—onto abandoned buildings and undeveloped projects in order to elicit civic discussions about neighborhoods.

Chang’s ultimate goal is to improve well-being by creating conversation opportunities. Public spaces offer that opportunity.

“I was recently at the Greenbuild conference in San Francisco where I made a ‘Before I Die’ wall just outside of the Moscone Center,” she says. “When walking into the event, there was a giant wall out in public space, and people started to write their hopes and dreams. A lot of them were very green-oriented.

There were also more emotional goals—‘Before I die I want to stop being afraid,’ ‘... enjoy waking up early’ or ‘...quit worrying about money.’”

Chang noticed something else as she watched attendees write on the board.

“People started to have conversations with one another,” she says. “The board was a kind of icebreaker for people from around the world who were all

alone at this giant conference. Having this kind of project in a public space helps people to open up.”

Chang was born in Pittsburgh, received her Masters degree in Urban Planning from Columbia University in New York and has worked as a designer for *The New York Times*, as a field researcher for Nokia, for a record label and with community groups worldwide. All of these experiences helped shape her into the person she is today, providing a unique perspective of her place in the world.

She currently lives in New Orleans’ Bywater neighborhood, an area that houses a creative

There was a house in New Orleans on Burgundy Street in the Marigny neighborhood, and for months it stood abandoned, a community blight. Candy Chang decided to change that. On one side of the building she placed huge chalkboards with a phrase: “Before I die, I want to\_\_\_\_\_.” Soon, passersby picked up chalk and wrote in wishes that, if fulfilled, would offer happiness or satisfaction.

“How it developed in New Orleans, during the next seven months... people young and old took pieces of chalk, people cried alone and laughed together... neighbors introduced themselves to each other,” Chang says.

Before installing the project, Chang spoke with neighbors who indicated that, at the very least, the house wouldn’t be any worse off.

“A grandmother across the street said people are around all the time, the block is safer now,” Chang says. “[That’s] one of the most meaningful things to me; this place was very down and out, a lot of crime, [but now there were] more people around.”

Getting people to talk to one another is one of Chang’s specialties.

**“I think public spaces have the potential to do a lot. They are shared spaces, they have power to nourish our well-being and help us see we’re not alone and help us make sense of our lives.”**



community that is welcoming and open to new experiences.

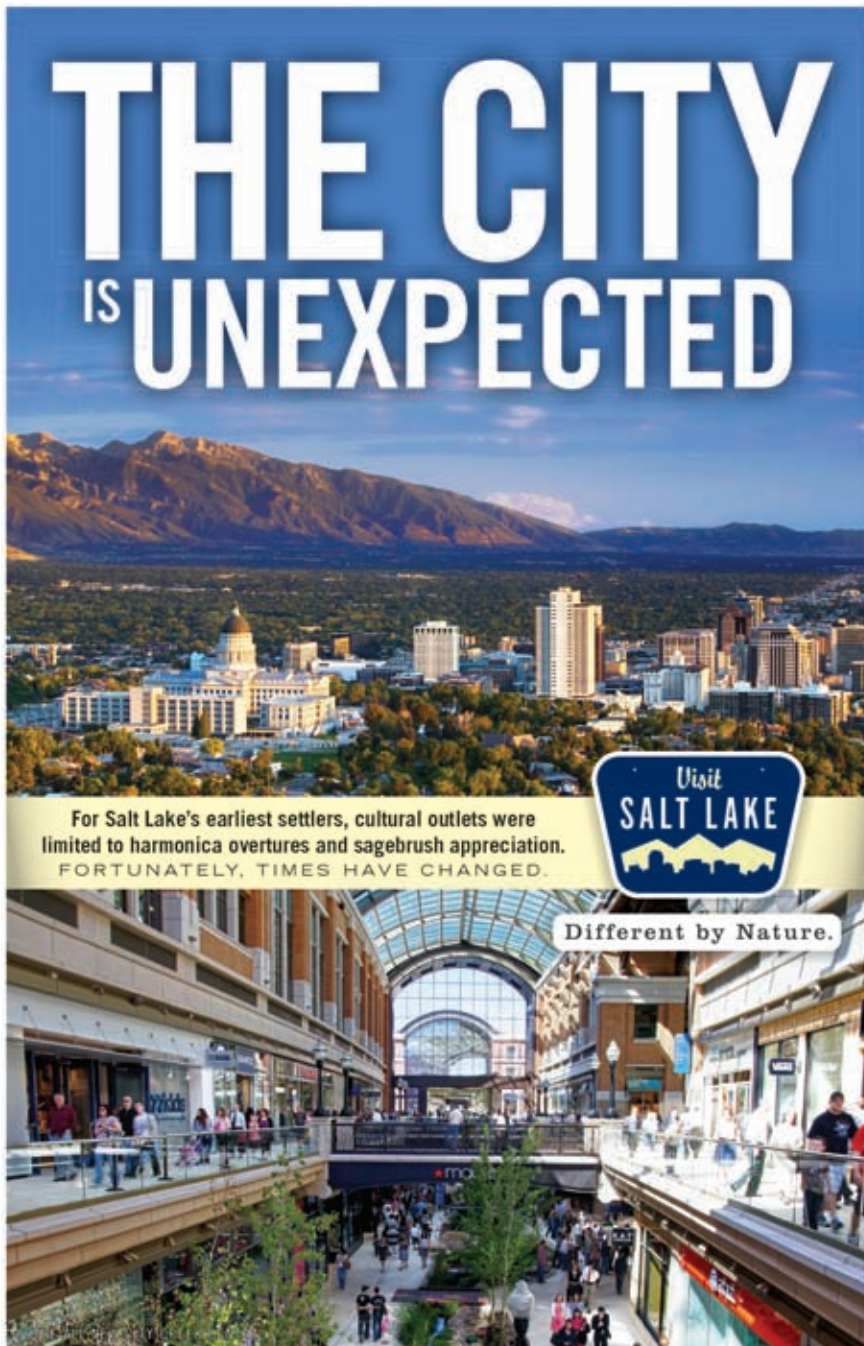
“New Orleans is very incubating,” she says. “I feel like I have the space to step back and reflect. The city helps me slow down a bit. It’s also very stimulating; there’s always something strange and wonderful going on down the street, always something interesting happening.”

A city like New Orleans, capable of offering a sensory overload and a respite

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from life—sometimes at the same time—is exactly what she needs.

“That’s one of the most important things of all, and that’s where my projects are going, related to health and well-being,” she says. “I believe in a future where more of our public spaces can be these kind of profound sanctuaries to help us become our best selves. I feel like these days people are always talking about how we’re more connected than ever. Because of the Internet, because of technology, we’re connected to more people, more everything, all of the time. Part of that is very exciting; it can also be distressing, because it’s much harder to make that space you need for solitude and the time to pause, step back and be quiet and reflect. I think right now, because of all this connectedness, it’s more



important than ever to find ways to be able to maintain perspective on what matters most to us. I think public spaces have the potential to do a lot. They are shared spaces, they have power to nourish our well-being and help us see we’re not alone and help us make sense of our lives.”

Great artistic projects are expressions of struggles. They’re a form of self-help—helping the artist understand her place in the world. Questions are raised with the work, and often, answers are found within the same piece. Upcoming projects will take Chang to the Deep South and the desert Southwest to explore how public spaces nourish well-being.

“The Almanac of Self-Neglect,” an installation at the Centre for the Living Arts in Mobile, Alabama, aims to “help us see that we’re not alone as we try to make sense of our lives,” she says.

“It will have a giant field of red umbrellas, then one singular colonnade, a cleared white path, a clearing in the middle with a singular desk and a chair and a book,” she says. “You can walk into this field with umbrellas and have this kind of sublime solitude for a moment where you can open up the book and share your deepest needs for personal well-being. Over the year, the Almanac will grow into a collect-

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ed record of things we need to shield from our chaotic environment in order to become our best selves.”

Chang’s other project, “Library of Re-invention,” will be set in a Mojave Desert ghost town on Route 66. There, she and a partner will assemble a library.

“It will be about pilgrimages, and the books in the library will be about pilgrimage and the idea of taking new trips to reinvent yourself, to change your life, to make yourself better,” she says.

Appropriately, the Mojave Desert is one of Chang’s favorite natural spaces. Growing up in the U.S. Midwest and on the East Coast, the vast, varied landscapes of the country continue to inspire her.

“The West has always had this wide-open romantic feel to me,” she says. “I just took a road trip again; this is something I do regularly, to step back and get away from it all, mentally and physically, to restore perspective and think deeply about

my life. I love the desert for that, and there’s a great spot in New Mexico, the Valley of the Gods, that just feels like you’re on Mars. There are few countries that have such a wide range of landscapes from the deserts to the beach to the mountains to everything in between, and it’s wonderful.”

Chang has also found inspiration in a creative 19th-century gardener, Sir Joseph Paxton, and sees his story as a lesson for the ages.

“We can all learn from creative people,” she says.

Paxton was the first person in England to grow the giant water lily pad. In doing so, he realized it had a specific rigid structure that made it incredibly strong. To test the plant’s strength, he placed a child on a lily pad...and then more children. It was clear the plant’s form enabled it to support significant weight, so he began applying that knowledge to other things, including

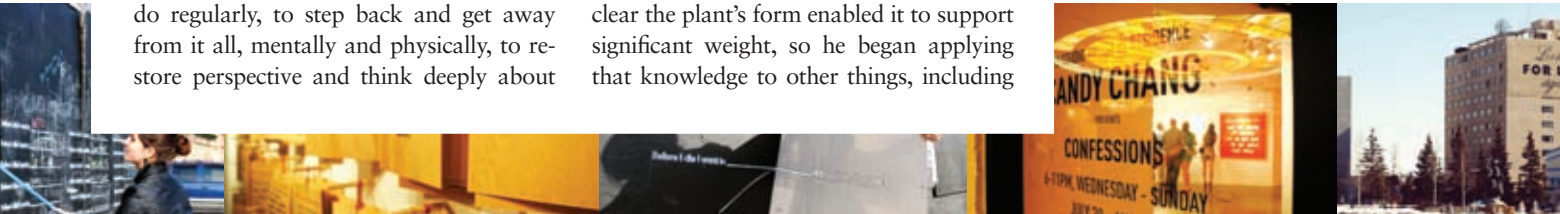
experimental greenhouses.

From his observations while growing a lily pad, he eventually designed The Crystal Palace in London, a celebration of the latest technology and the industrial revolution. The curious gardener became an architect.

“It shows how small or big we want to make our disciplines, how your work and life can change depending on your attitude,” Chang says. “It wasn’t some unattainable flash of genius. He was just curious, he tried things out and kept an open mind—because of that he did really great things. That’s something we can all do.”

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