

GHANA THINKTANK AT FUSEBOX FESTIVAL, AUSTIN, TX

CHRISTOPHER ROBBINS

Christopher Robbins is an artist and founding member of Ghana Think Tank. He is an Assistant Professor in the School of Art & Design at SUNY Purchase College. Robbins works on the uneasy cusp of public art and international development, creating sculptural interventions in the daily lives of strangers. He has lived and worked in London, Tokyo, West Africa, the Fiji Islands, and former Yugoslavia. He also served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Benin, West Africa and spoke at a United Nations conference about his cross-cultural work in the South Pacific.

The Carolina Planning Journal solicited this article from the artists' group, Ghana ThinkTank, in the hopes that it would expose planners around North Carolina to the artist's perspective as well as ways in which artists may expand and interrogate the process of participation.

A candy-colored folding cart mounted on bright purple wheels from a child's bicycle rolls up to the capitol building in Austin, Texas. A pair of facing benches are mounted on these wheels; they are protected from the Texas sun by a yellow canopy sewn from the high-visibility fabric of construction vests.

"Are you selling hot dogs?"

"Is that a swing set?"

Obnoxious blinking LEDS in overbright green pixels give passersby two options of where to sit: "GENTRIFIERS! SIT HERE! GENTRIFIERS! GENTRIFIERS!"

or "Gentrified.... SOLD... Gentrified... Sold..."

"What's gentrification? ... Ohh, is that the thing that's happening down by the river?"

As we dragged this cart into different parts of Austin—a crowded bar, a coffee shop, a farmers market, a notorious street corner, an empty lot soon to be filled with condos, the state capitol—we greeted people with a simplistic question: "How would you summarize your relationship with Austin, as a Gentrifier or Gentrified?"

"I was born in Austin—I am NOT a Gentrifier."

"Sir, this is a minority-owned business. We don't want that conversation (about gentrification) to get started here."

".... Well, I guess I am a gentrifier. So, what do I have to do here?"

Once someone had selected a pigeon hole (usually reluctantly, and after much discussion of what it meant, how it was an unfair polarization, and what the hell did Ghana have to do with any of this anyway?), we sat them down in their appropriate seat in the cart.

The gentrifiers sat at the "What's Your Austin Problem?" app, where they were instructed to record their personal problems with Austin.

Alternatively, the gentrified sat at the "What's Your Solution?" app, where they could swipe through a growing list of over one hundred problems people had submitted about Austin and then submit their solutions through the video interface.

This was an attempt to apply the flipped power dynamic central to Ghana ThinkTank's process to see Austin in a way that was immediately accessible and localized.

Ghana ThinkTank is a public art project founded in 2006 with the mission to "Develop the First World." We collect problems in the so-called "developed" world and send them to think tanks we have established in Cuba, Ghana, Iran, Mexico, El Salvador, and the United States prison system to analyze and solve. Then we work with the communities where the problems originated to implement those solutions—whether they seem impractical or brilliant. By exchanging problems and looking for help in unexpected places, we flip typical power dynamics, shift points of view, and build unlikely coalitions.

This public exchange has been commissioned in England, Germany, China, the Netherlands, Sweden, former Yugoslavia, and all across the United States. It has also grown into many fields, including peace-building in Mitrovica, a violently divided town in Kosovo, diplomacy with the US State Department in Morocco, and architecture and urban development in Detroit and Austin.

This process plays out differently in each location, but there are some simple truths we learned we can depend on:

Everyone likes to complain and everyone wants to be needed. We begin by simply asking "what is your problem?" Then we bring that problem to the think tanks and ask for help. In developing think tanks, we focus on groups of people who are not usually in the position of being relied on as experts.

We also rely on social accountability. A person in

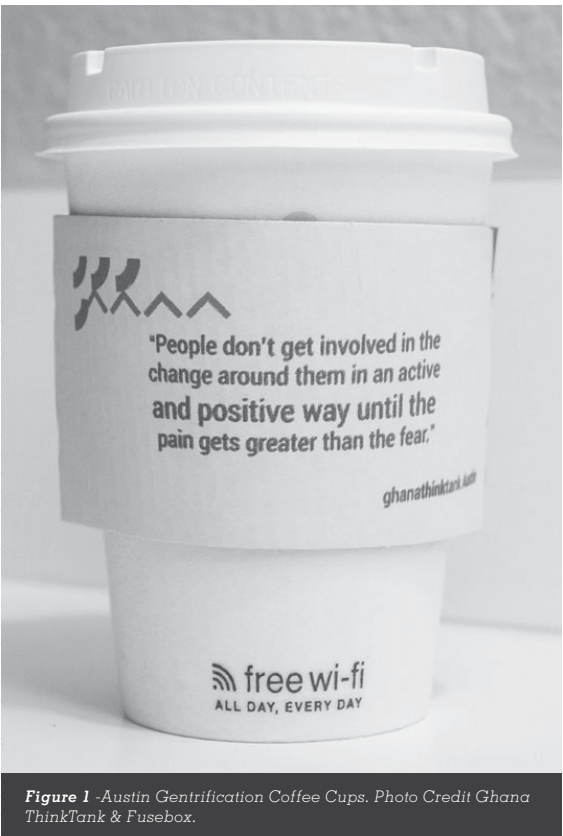


Figure 1 -Austin Gentrification Coffee Cups. Photo Credit Ghana ThinkTank & Fusebox.



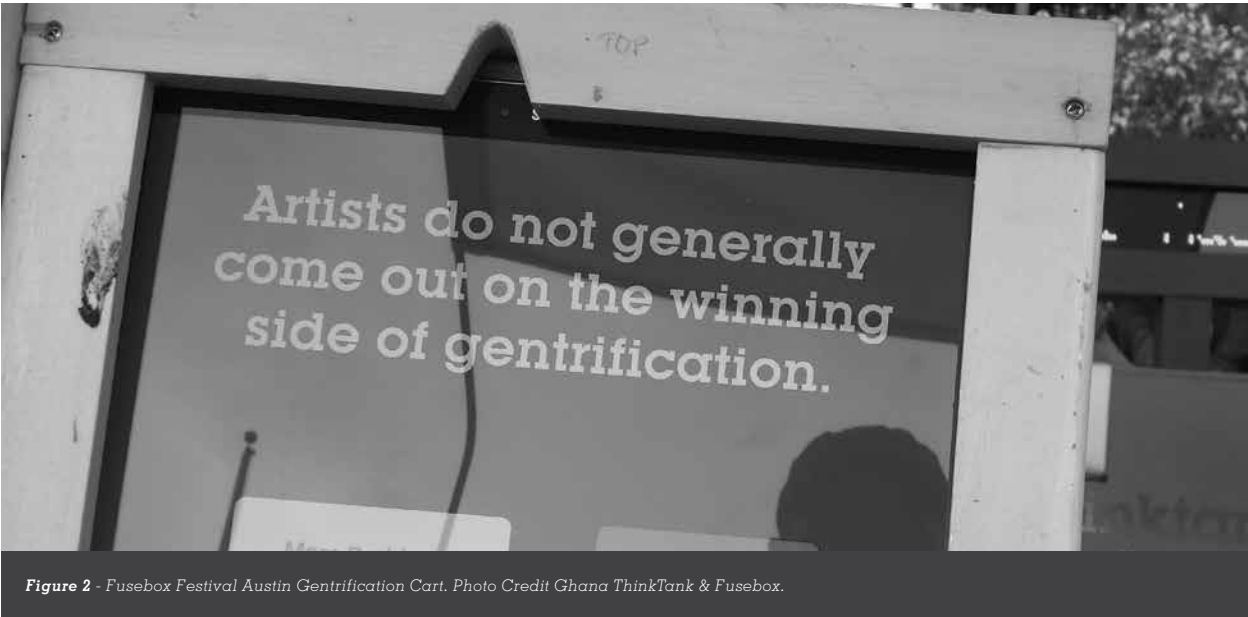


Figure 2 - Fusebox Festival Austin Gentrification Cart. Photo Credit Ghana ThinkTank & Fusebox.

the “first world” is complaining about something they care about. It takes a few minutes to do so. We then bring that issue to a variety of think tanks all over the world and return to that person with videos showing groups of intelligent, thoughtful, and often funny people from Iran, Ghana, Cuba, El Salvador, Sudan, and prison, all focused on helping out with the issue that person raised. Even if that person initially treated the project as a joke, there is now a degree of accountability going on: “look at all the effort that has been put into solving your problem. And now we are here, backed up by a local respected institution, with funds and a mandate to implement these solutions with you.”

Our process is not based on an intricate methodology, but

on some simple and dependable human characteristics. For the Fusebox Festival 2015 with thinkEAST and ArtPlace, we questioned the assumed power dynamics and false binary of “gentrifier” and “gentrified” by positioning the “gentrifier” as the person in need of help and the “gentrified” as the one with the answers. It was a way to force people to consider their roles in gentrification, even unwittingly. Of course, gentrification is a charged and misused term. To some it means displacement, to others it is a question of authenticity, and to others it is simply a matter of race; gentrification is what you do if you are white and middle-to-upper class. By starting with this false binary, we were able to approach gentrification in its many facets while holding ourselves accountable to our own positions in

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these processes. That was the major goal for our work in the festival—not to simply engender a conversation about the many meanings and issues of gentrification in Austin, but to ask each person we encountered what their personal role and stake was in gentrification. Bringing it back to Ghana ThinkTank, it was also a way to perform the “flip.” Americans enter Africa with a simplistic and polarizing understanding of a situation and then, through attempts at goodwill, insert our own power into that situation based on a simplistic understanding. In Austin, we started with this simplistic understanding and then peeled it open together. In addition to continuing to collect problems with the cart, we publicized the “gentrification problems” people had submitted in a number of ways. For instance we distributed 4,500 coffee sleeves and a series of postcards, among other things, printed with quotes from interviews with Austin residents about gentrification, change, displacement, growth, and authenticity. A wide variety of methods for capturing, publicizing, and discussing people’s problems related to gentrification provide ways for diverse groups of people to get involved in the planning conversation.

Methods for collecting input are fun and approachable: a bright red button, a candy-colored cart. We consider many different time scales: people can give quick feedback in twenty seconds, or can choose to follow the project and become more involved in its development over time. We are also not afraid to be controversial. As outsiders to the situation who do not have a long-term stake (as opposed to planners and their projects’ stakeholders), we can play

the role of “fall guy” or “naive outsider,” asking those seemingly tone-deaf questions that bring out the uncomfortable truths lurking behind most public projects. In Austin, it was our goal to bring people into the planning conversation who feel they don’t have time, don’t care, don’t have any power, or just think we should go away. A very particular type of person attends an official planning meeting. Those who do not attend official meetings have voices that matter and are often left out of the planning process. Our projects start by considering large, societal issues through the lens of specific effects on specific individuals, bringing non-customary perspectives to bear on the small stories collected through that process and then involving individuals in the implementation of those ideas. We facilitate people taking an active role in the development of their own neighborhoods by creating rough, visual intrusions into the normative process. Doing so builds unusual connections, unlikely alliances, and forces us to question our assumptions about what we think is good for someone else.

Those interested in learning more about Ghana Think Tank are invited to visit the website ghanathinktank.org.