"Our relations with cities are like our relations with people. We love them, hate them, or are indifferent toward them. On our first day in a city that is new to us, we go looking for the city. We go down this street, around that corner. We are aware of the faces of passers-by. But the city eludes us, and we become uncertain whether we are looking for a city, or for a person.” - Victor Burgin, Some Cities

"The negro jooks...are primitive rural counterparts of resort night clubs, where turpentine workers take their evening relaxation deep in the pine forests." - Zora Neale Hurston

When Theaster Gates, the potter, city planner, West Side favorite son, and most recently, darling child of the contemporary art world, took a job as arts administrator at the University of Chicago, he decided to buy a home in the blighted neighborhood of Grand Crossing and turn it into a very different kind of Projects.

From the outside, the one story brick house on the 6900 block of South Dorchester looks much like those around it: it’s sort of ugly. But the details set it apart: it’s painted, and the ten-foot tall wooden gate has a geometric pattern carved into the top. Inside the single side door, the space is eclectic, feels something like a cross between a church kitchen, an art gallery, and a temple. Besides the track lighting on the low ceiling, almost every object seems like an heirloom. An antique Chinese cabinet stands against the wall. The shelves are full of ceramic pots and whole walls are covered in books. The space is warm and smells like candles and old wood. The house is built around two main rooms: a combined kitchen-dining room-living room, and large, mostly empty front room, with some benches and chairs, an upright piano, and an archive of over 8,000 records lining the walls. Gates also owns the house next door, a tall wooden structure that he gutted and is in the slow process of renovating. Inside it are stored two other collections: 12,000 art and architecture books, and over 60,000 glass lanternslides with images from any period you can name. The rooms themselves seem to ask the question: What is this?

Gates calls his properties the Dorchester Projects, and is designing them to be a new kind of space that will facilitate a new kind of interaction between neighbors, and, just maybe, a new kind of neighborhood. This month an artists residency series began to create some of the first live gatherings around the space.

Gates is teaching at Harvard this spring, and wasn’t around to explain to guests on the first night. By phone, he thought out loud about the first questions of the Dorchester Projects. “When I think about placemaking… I think about what makes someone want to be in one place rather than another. Planners say its clean sidewalks, nice parks, transportation, and that’s all good. I actually think it’s about having the sexiest cultural shit imaginable…” He pondered, “How then, since I’m able to choose, should I create my home? How can I leverage my home to add to the constellation of beautiful cultural moments in the city?” Gates spoke from New York City, where he was preparing for the Armory Show, one of the most prominent contemporary art fairs. Gates was asked if he might describe where he was more specifically, since his work was, after all, about place,
space, distance, community. He hesitated. “Let’s say uh… actually, how about we say I’m in Cambridge, since that’s where I am, you know, in spirit right now.”

“A fancy office at Harvard?”
“Sure. A fancy office at Harvard.”

Gates’ ideas – firmly rooted in the history and spaces of his life – have sold, filled lecture halls, flooded museums, and along the way made him somewhat rich and famous. But bringing theory into a neighborhood is a different kind of leveraging. Can a Projects built founded on cultural value start a renaissance on the block? From a hypothetical Harvard, Gates layed out his formula. “It’s for me. And it’s for us. It’s for my neighbors. And then…” Gates pauses often in interviews. “It’s for all those who will come.”

All twenty-six people who came to the Dorchester Projects Friday night arrived a little confused. They had travelled through pouring rain from all across the city to hear jazz saxophonist David Boykin on the first night of his artist residency. They were drawn by personal invitations, word of mouth, or anonymous advertisements, and while some of them were familiar with the Projects, most were not. They arrived at the squat building, and cautiously approached the single side door (“Is this a jazz club?”). Inside, Elly Fishman and Dara Epison, respectively a young white woman and a young black woman, both in their twenties and sharply dressed in sweaters, were sitting on the kitchen counters. They introduced themselves as coordinators, said welcome, told them that yes, they had found the right place, and that the music would be starting soon.

Among those who walked through the side door were: a preacher and his wife, an artist, several MFA students from the University of Chicago, Boykin’s father, a DJ, a poet and a limo driver (same person), and a journalist from the local press. A slight majority of the crowd was black, mostly African American, and the rest was white. Some people knew no one, and nobody knew everyone.

Down a small hallway is the other main room of the space, where, between walls covered in books and records, Boykin’s drummer, a sixteen-year-old former student, is warming up. The small crowd slowly settles on a couple of benches in front of him. and as Fishman and Epison step to the front, it’s clear that not even the coordinators are quite sure how to act. “These spaces are…” Fishman hesitates, “…transformative spaces… It’s a house. It’s also a gallery, and a place where music can happen.

“It’s going to be a learning experience,” Fishman explained to the small crowd. “We’re an audience too.” She explained the Projects, and then Epison talked about the archives. When she finished, Boykin counted off, “1, - , 2, - , 1, 2, 3, 4,” and did a new tune straight-ahead. His audience relaxed only gradually, in equal parts uncomfortable and intrigued, still unsure where they were or what was going on around them. They were, after all, in the home of a stranger.
Theaster Gates is a black, beautiful, male, and a good talker, and none of these are separate from his art. He is 5’10, he keeps his head shaved close, and he dresses to match his surroundings, which usually means that he dresses well. He also speaks to match his surroundings. In his day-to-day life, and sometimes in the same conversation, he moves between high art speak (“…interstitial spaces… new modes of receivership…”) to a black Chicago vernacular (“Nah nigga”). Voices are powerful; Gates knows this and uses his speech to his advantage. But in neither case is he faking it.

Gates was born in Mississippi and grew up on the West Side in the mostly black neighborhood of Garfield Park. He was the son of a builder and the youngest of seven siblings, all of them girls. “Something about the family I grew up in, the house always felt like a public space. The walls were always permeable.” Gates was a musical kid, and became choir director of his family’s black church at age fourteen – the same year he finished middle school at a mostly white north side magnet school and started high school at Lane Tech. From the beginning, Gates belonged to multiple communities with conflicting expectations: the black church and a magnet school, a big family on a West Side block and the galleries of the international art scene. Gates left Chicago for Iowa State University where he studied ceramics and urban planning – the combination reflects a second tension in his life and work: between the crafting of physical objects out of raw material, and the conduction of culture through planning.

For a few years after graduation Gates tried making a living through ceramics. He grew bored, and on the advice of his mentor he went to Tokoname, Japan for a ceramics residency. “Japan reminded me that vernacular architecture was still potent,” remembers. The sight of a fish shack changed his art permanently. I saw them dotting the landscape, and they looked like toolsheds or shotgun shacks. They made me remember Mississippi… but maybe I was so close to Mississippi that I never really saw it.” Soon after, Gates’s instructor told him to use his own identity as inspiration for his pots, so Gates began treating themes of the African American south with the material techniques of Japanese pottery. After Japan, Gates did a stint as an urban planner, working for the CTA to plan art on the El lines, but municipal planning didn’t stick. Gates soon moved to Cape Town to study African religions, becoming increasingly fascinated with the complex roots of the black church he came up in.

At some point, the various experiences, studies, contemplations, reflections and practices that Gates describes, began to develop into a conceptual art practice. His work is both tactile and sensual and profoundly theoretical, deeply historical and infinitely productive of future possibilities, black and colorless, local and cosmopolitan, and most importantly, perhaps for critics, especially, it frames these distinctions in a new way. In an interview with Fishman, Darby English, a University of Chicago Art Historian discussed Gates’ ambiguous public. “It’s very vague for me… Sometimes it seems very specific, Chicago’s South Side, or even just one block of that zone, or the part of it encompassing the local African-American community. Other times, it seems as though it could just as well be all the people, everywhere—like, literally any person capable of being recognized by a creatively reimagined, love-driven spirituality.”
Gates based his first major solo exhibition around his reflections on Japan. For “Plate Convergences,” opened in 2006 at the Hyde Park Art Center, Gates wrote a fictional inversion of his own biography, in which a Japanese man builds a life in the southern United States. Gates and his alter ego converged around a dinner party in the gallery that blended Japanese dishes with the cuisine of the American south; the diners’ plates later hung on the walls as art pieces. The soiree set a precedent: the deliberate exploration of identity in intentionally constructed spaces runs through most of Gates’ exhibitions. Fishman, who came to work for Gates right out of college, says with only a hint of sarcasm, “Theaster’s career is marked by different kinds of parties.”

In 2009, he brought Temple Exercises, a performance and installation series exploring the character of early 20th century black shoeshiners, to the Museum of Contemporary Art. There were three performances, one at the MCA, another at the Little Black Pearl art center in Hyde Park, and a third at Shine King, a storefront shoe shine business on the West Side that Gates has frequented since childhood. For each space, Gates built a temple out of discarded wood from the former Wrigley Gum factory that had once been used to dry spearmint gum. He used each one as a performance space for the Black Monks of Mississippi, a music ensemble he started with Wilco member Leroy Bach that blends black blues and gospel with the restrained patterns of eastern religious chants.

In June 2009, the Whitney called. The curators were interested in exhibiting a piece by Gates as part of the 2010 biennial, which would showcase sixty of America’s most promising artists. His piece Cosmology of the Yard filled the museum’s courtyard, next to the restaurant. He built a small temple in the center out of old wood from the Wrigley gum factory, and hung a yellow neon sign with the word “Shine” above it. Inside he played a split image video inside of a shoe shine, a Baptist sermon, and one Gates’ assistants, a young Chinese man, cutting the Wrigley boards into squares. The video had been assembled in Dorchester.

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In 2006, Gates took the job as arts coordinator of the University of Chicago. It was then, as he went to work as an administrator for an elite private university, a suit job, in other words, that he bought the Dorchester House and turned his living space into an unconventional cultural asset. “My father was mad at me when I told him I was going to turn this into a library. He said I should rent out rooms, take a few hundred dollars a month. He had trouble with the idea that I could turn the space into a cultural asset, and that a cultural asset could then go on to bring value in the future.”

Gates speaks seriously of building an informal cultural space on the South Side, where few formal ones exist, and his project of turning his house into a semi-public space for cultural production is an ambitious one. “The work that happens on a block like Dorchester feeds the need for larger cultural infrastructure. A space keeps producing. It doesn’t stop, and it starts to feel like a new model of development. Neighbors as developers.” As in most of Gates’ work, the momentum came from a mix of universal ideals and pragmatic self-knowledge. “To culturally ascend, one doesn’t have to move,
one just has to make culture,” he said from a hypothetical Harvard. Then a moment later: “I mean I can’t even get a bottle of sake in the grocery store. What about all the other weird mufuckers like me who just want a good drink? Man, I’m not going to Logan Square to do shit. I’m going to build a fucking watering hole.”

A watering hole of culture is a more appropriate in describing the materials that have gathered around the space. In 2009, the University of Chicago’s art department digitized the images on its glass lanternslide collection, which covered most every genre and period ever studied at the university. The now-obsolete glass plates were to be thrown out. Gates asked for them, and the department donated all 60,000. Months later, when the owners of Prairie Avenue books, an art and architecture bookstore downtown, decided to retire, Gates asked about buying their 14,000 volume collection to establish a small public library in 6916. They sold it for a fraction of its value. In Spring 2010, when Hyde Park’s Dr. Wax record store went out of business, Gates bought all 8,000 leftover records. In April, Gates bought the house next door at 6916 Dorchester, a crumbling mess that he gradually restored, and started to fill it with the archives. “There are so many things…” Gates pauses to contemplate, “that I can’t ponder them all. So why not allow those materials to act as inspiration for other things to happen?”

The Dorchester space has had many creators. Fishman and Epison do the day-to-day work of growing the space. John Preus of the Rebuild foundation did much of the building, including the floors, which at first appear to be bamboo but are in fact made out of old bowling lanes. Matt Metzger, a painter with an MFA from the University of Chicago, built shelves and benches, as well as the giant chairs inspired by Shine King. Ken Dunn from the ReSource center brought in building materials. LeRoy Bach, of the Black Monks, is officially a co-administrator of the space. Interns circulate, gradually cataloging the huge collections.

Art and ownership are a complicated mix. Gates’ work blurs the distinction between vision and egoism, but not always gracefully; in managing the space he’s known to be headstrong, egotistical even, and the distinction between employees and collaborators can be blurry. At the Armory Show in New York, Gates sold several chairs based on the Shine King exhibit. The chairs themselves were made by Metzger, based on a rough description by Theaster. He, like the other Dorchester Project employees, was paid a wage, not a cut. The Dorchester Projects, though, is by nature a collective creation. “A lot of people have keys to my house, you know,” he laughs. “It’s like in the South, when you can’t buy liquor on Sundays, so everybody gets together and drinks in the backyard. It’s like a juke joint. It’s like all I can do is create an environment where some good shit can take off. It’s like… get some good musicians, let’s invite some friends, and I’m bringing the beer.”

That first Friday night, there was beer, along with wine served in glass cups, and Tupperware containers full of fried rice, plantains, and baked fish that a friend of Boykin’s brought for the occasion. After Boykin’s trio took their first break, the crowd loosened up into conversation (the food helped). People slowly start to look to each other for clues about the situation, where they were, and what it might mean to be there. The
two DJs and the poet limo driver talk about urban planning and public schools. Matt Metzger sits with friends on the same benches he built. Things are choppy on the first night, but the artist residencies are creating live moments around the strange space of the Projects.

Planning has begun for more moments. The coordinators have collectively chosen five artists and approached each candidate with three requirements: hold a general meeting with the organizers of the project, include some form of community engagement, and participate in a public program or exhibit at the end of the residency. Every artist has accepted.

Boykin was a natural for the first residency. Playing in various styles of hard bop, free jazz, and hip-hop, Boykin is a standby of the Chicago jazz scene, and as an artist and educator he’s shown a serious commitment to nurturing jazz on the South Side. “This residency has the potential to add to the diversity of the jazz scene, especially with so many clubs closing. It’s important for young people as well, to have a place to play.” Boykin’s drummer for the show was a sixteen-year-old former student. For May and June, DJ Ayana is planning a Sunday soul afternoon where she spins records from the Dr. Wax collection and discusses their histories. She’ll also play the official June 25th opening of the Dorchester Projects, along with David Boykin. For the rest of the summer the Chicago Film Archive, the only group resident, will be screening films in the backyard, and encouraging residents to bring their own home movies. In September October, the space will be turned over to Artist Torkwase Dyson, who collaborated with Gates on the Whitney biennial, and has suggested building a light sculpture inspired by the archives in the adjacent lot. November and December the space will host Avery Young, a Chicago performance artist who blends spoken word, song, jazz, gospel and chant into a style he calls “Sunday mornin’ jook-joint.”

Theaster Gates home is much closer to the watering hole and the juke joint than a full-scale rebirth of the South Side’s cultural infrastructure. But among the attendees of Friday’s show, the journalist included, it felt like a good place to start. By the end of the night the guests had relaxed. They talked about the CPS industrial complex, and about Record Row that used to be on State Street. At the end of the night, the goodbyes were sincere, cards switched wallets, and most said they’d be back. People even carpooled through the rain—the limo driver poet got a ride from an MFA.

Sitting in his fancy office at Harvard, Gates was asked if there’s anything else he would like a reader to know, something that perhaps gets overlooked in the hype, which will surely be descending on Dorchester as the residencies move on. He spoke seriously. “Yeah, there is… that I’m saying all this knowing that I’m part of different communities, and I often just want them to come to my house as much as I go to theirs.”
Thanks to Elly Fishman. Her undergraduate BA thesis on Gates’ early art filled in many of the blanks.