

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Culture Lab Detroit: What Creativity Can Do for Urban Regeneration



Guests at Culture Lab Detroit include, clockwise from top left, David Adjaye, Fernando and Humberto Campana, Jane Schulak, Miguel Angelo, David Stark, My Brightest Diamond, and Theaster Gates. ((L-R): Courtesy of the artists, Culture Lab Detroit, Seth Smoot, and Sara Pooley)

Despite the economic tumult plaguing Detroit, and consequently the city's art scene, creativity is flourishing. "There's this 21st-century creative renaissance that seems to be happening," says Jane Shulak, founder of the Culture Lab Detroit conference, taking place April 24 through 26. Creative talents, some local and some from around the world, are taking advantage of the Motor City's current surplus of low-cost spaces and sparking what Shulak calls a city-wide grassroots movement that's high on productive potential. An architectural consortium can sprout up in a former auto body shop, for instance, and an artist collective can take hold of an abandoned warehouse.

Zara, Janelle. "Culture Lab Detroit: What Creativity Can do for Urban Regeneration." ARTINFO. April 24, 2014.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

Shulak launched Culture Lab last year as “a catalyst for conversations and collaborations between Detroit’s artists, designers, technologists, and the larger design world,” according to its official mission statement, with hopes of raising the city’s artistic profile to an international scale. The 2014 edition will host a cross-cultural mash-up of unlikely musicians including My Brightest Diamond and Migguel Anggelo, as well as Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates, London-based architect David Adjaye, and São Paulo-based industrial designers Fernando and Humberto Campana, in a conversation hosted by Brooklyn-based designer and author David Stark. The talk will address subject matter essential to a city facing financial and cultural struggles: “regenerative design in urban areas.”

Shulak spoke with ARTINFO about what she hopes such conversation can truly achieve in a city marching forward in the face of uncertainty.

What’s happening in Detroit right now? For people who don’t live there, the scenarios we’ve seen have ranged from very dire straits to an artistic surge.

It feels as if pioneers from all over the world and homegrown people who have lived here their whole lives are making things. There are so many, I don’t want to leave anything out. There are a couple of really strong collaborative companies. There’s Pony Ride. [Property developer] Patricia Cooley has started a consortium of artists and makers all under one roof, like Veronika Scott, who just got the Diane von Furstenburg Award for making sleeping bags into down coats. They even make blue jeans there. There’s another place called Practice Space. It’s an architectural consortium that’s redesigned and taken over Joe’s Auto Body Shop and is currently redesigning the architectural code for Detroit. Green Garage is a zero-waste woodshop and metalshop. There’s a letterpress called Signal Return that hosts writers’ houses. There’s a farm to table scene where the restaurateurs physically make their own restaurants. It’s a very grassroots but very strong movement, and it’s happening all over the city.

How is Detroit’s current climate conducive to this movement?

It’s as basic as inexpensive buildings and inexpensive space. And although Detroit is very large if you look at a map, it feels like a little village. It’s a very tight community for the creatives, very welcoming and very open and very easy to make connections.

Zara, Janelle. “Culture Lab Detroit: What Creativity Can do for Urban Regeneration.” ARTINFO. April 24, 2014.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

People want to be where that energy is. They want to gravitate where the artists are. I think of the last places we saw this happen as far as the United States goes was in Brooklyn, maybe, but it's clearly happening in Detroit.

Whenever a city sees artists starting to take over post-industrial spaces, it's often automatically deemed a "new Brooklyn." Does the comparison get tiring?

I can't make that assumption. But I do think Detroit has always been unique — it has always been a place of great design and has always had its own way of expressing itself. There was a point that it was one of the wealthiest cities in the world. It has a history of reinventing itself. That's always been at the core of what it's all about.

Does the city's strain also have something to do with bringing people together?

To an extent, yes. It's just that they're all interested in the same things and they're inspired by each other. Another thing is that Detroit started the industrial age. We have unbelievable industrial companies — metal factories, plastic factories, glass, brick, wood. We've got it all. As an artist, to come here and to have a beautiful building that doesn't cost a lot, access to materials, and the best foundries in the world, and people who have that knowledge, it's got to be heaven. And it's the Midwest. People are friendly and they're willing to help each other. Those are probably the most important ingredients we have in Detroit.

Last year, Culture Lab's speakers included the founder of Urban Planning and Design for the American City and the creative director of Shinola, a Detroit-based company. This year looks to have a more international, less academic focus. How did you choose your lineup this time around?

Because Detroit is in such a state, it's very important that there's an immediate takeaway, not that people who come here just check us out and then leave. I've tried very hard to make those connections within the city. Potentially, every single participant could develop a project here. For the second year, I made a wish-list, and I looked for a person like a Theaster Gates or a David Adjaye or the Campana Brothers or David Starck who wants to be engaged and fit into the community; they

don't want to come, just look, and leave. I was also looking for people who are good in extreme conditions. This is an extreme condition. At the concert, for instance, the performers are very versatile. They can work an audience in a way that somebody who is less versatile can't. Theaster Gates works in extreme conditions. He develops small artists' communities in areas that desperately need attention. The Campana Brothers work in an area in Sao Paulo that's in a condition very similar to Detroit — that's where they find inspiration. They love the energy and the old buildings here, and they're excited to be a part of what comes next. Starck says that he feels similarly, that Detroit reminds him of why he's an artist in the first place. David Adjaye would love to have a building in Detroit and set the tone in the 21st century.

I found the Campanas to be a really interesting choice, given that collectible design isn't as well-known a discipline.

The Campanas find beauty with found objects and reusable things. They fell in love, for instance, with our junkyards and auto parts spaces and beautiful architectural monuments of the past. They have this desire to intervene in the landscape, to somehow be a part of it. I wanted each practitioner to be very different in how they express themselves but to have a common thread that was clear. They each perform art interventions, but the way they perform them is completely different. They're also very excited in interacting with one another — they are their idols, I didn't realize.

Culture Lab's mission statement emphasizes providing a platform for conversation. What, given the city's current dire straits, can conversation truly achieve?

Isn't communication the most important thing? Especially in Detroit, where people are working with their own hands to achieve their goals? There needs to be some kind of connection and communication between the people who want to work here and don't live here, and those of us who do. I think conversation is a great way of connecting people. I'm calling it a conversation instead of a conference or a lecture. It's less formal, but the bar is high. These are some of the finest practitioners in the world. The talents living within Detroit are equally as outstanding.