

## TEDTalks, Theaster Gates

### How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art

00:14	I'm a potter, which seems like a fairly humble vocation. I know a lot about pots. I've spent about 15 years making them. One of the things that really excites me in my artistic practice and being trained as a potter is that you very quickly learn how to make great things out of nothing; that I spent a lot of time at my wheel with mounds of clay trying stuff; and that the limitations of my capacity, my ability, was based on my hands and my imagination; that if I wanted to make a really nice bowl and I didn't know how to make a foot yet, I would have to learn how to make a foot; that that process of learning has been very, very helpful to my life. I feel like, as a potter, you also start to learn how to shape the world.
01:10	There have been times in my artistic capacity that I wanted to reflect on other really important moments in the history of the U.S., the history of the world where tough things happened, but how do you talk about tough ideas without separating people from that content? Could I use art like these old, discontinued firehoses from Alabama, to talk about the complexities of a moment of civil rights in the '60s? Is it possible to talk about my father and I doing labor projects? My dad was a roofer, construction guy, he owned small businesses, and at 80, he was ready to retire and his tar kettle was my inheritance. Now, a tar kettle doesn't sound like much of an inheritance. It wasn't. It was stinky and it took up a lot of space in my studio, but I asked my dad if he would be willing to make some art with me, if we could reimagine this kind of nothing material as something very special. And by elevating the material and my dad's skill, could we start to think about tar just like clay, in a new way, shaping it differently, helping us to imagine what was possible?
02:33	After clay, I was then kind of turned on to lots of different kinds of materials, and my studio grew a lot because I thought, well, it's not really about the material, it's about our capacity to shape things. I became more and more interested in ideas and more and more things that were happening just outside my studio. Just to give you a little bit of context, I live in Chicago. I live on the South Side now. I'm a West Sider. For those of you who are not Chicagoans, that won't mean anything, but if I didn't mention that I was a West Sider, there would be a lot of people in the city that would be very upset.
03:10	The neighborhood that I live in is Grand Crossing. It's a neighborhood that has seen better days. It is not a gated community by far. There is lots of abandonment in my neighborhood, and while I was kind of busy making pots and busy making art and having a good art career, there was all of this stuff that was happening just outside my studio. All of us know about failing housing markets and the challenges of blight, and I feel like we talk about it with some of our cities more than others, but I think a lot of our U.S. cities and beyond have the challenge of blight, abandoned buildings that people no longer know what to do anything with. And so I thought, is there a way that I could start to think about these buildings as an extension or an expansion of my artistic practice? And that if I was thinking along with other creatives – architects, engineers, real estate finance people – that us together might be able to kind of think in more complicated ways about the reshaping of cities.
04:14	And so I bought a building. The building was really affordable. We tricked it out. We made it as beautiful as we could to try to just get some activity happening on my block. Once I bought the building for about 18,000 dollars, I didn't have any money left. So I started sweeping the building as a kind of performance. This is performance art, and people would come over, and I would start sweeping. Because the broom was free and sweeping was free. It worked out. (Laughter) But we would use the building, then, to stage exhibitions, small dinners, and we found that that building on my block, Dorchester – we now referred to the block as Dorchester projects – that in a way that building became a kind of gathering site for lots of different kinds of activity. We turned the building into what we called now the Archive House. The Archive House would do all of these amazing things. Very significant people in the city and beyond would find themselves in the middle of the hood. And that's when I felt like maybe there was a relationship between my history with clay and this new thing that was starting to develop, that we were slowly starting to reshape how people imagined the South Side of the city.
05:35	One house turned into a few houses, and we always tried to suggest that not only is creating a beautiful vessel important, but the contents of what happens in those buildings is also very important. So we were not only thinking about development, but we were thinking about the program, thinking about the kind of connections that could happen between one house and another, between one neighbor and another. This building became what we call the Listening House, and it has a collection of discarded books from the Johnson Publishing Corporation, and other books from an old bookstore that was going out of business. I was actually just wanting to activate these buildings as much as I could with whatever and whoever would join me.

06:23	In Chicago, there's amazing building stock. This building, which had been the former crack house on the block, and when the building became abandoned, it became a great opportunity to really imagine what else could happen there. So this space we converted into what we call Black Cinema House. Black Cinema House was an opportunity in the hood to screen films that were important and relevant to the folk who lived around me, that if we wanted to show an old Melvin Van Peebles film, we could. If we wanted to show "Car Wash," we could. That would be awesome. The building we soon outgrew, and we had to move to a larger space. Black Cinema House, which was made from just a small piece of clay, had to grow into a much larger piece of clay, which is now my studio.
07:14	What I realized was that for those of you who are zoning junkies, that some of the things that I was doing in these buildings that had been left behind, they were not the uses by which the buildings were built, and that there are city policies that say, "Hey, a house that is residential needs to stay residential." But what do you do in neighborhoods when ain't nobody interested in living there? That the people who have the means to leave have already left? What do we do with these abandoned buildings? And so I was trying to wake them up using culture.
07:47	We found that that was so exciting for folk, and people were so responsive to the work, that we had to then find bigger buildings. By the time we found bigger buildings, there was, in part, the resources necessary to think about those things. In this bank that we called the Arts Bank, it was in pretty bad shape. There was about six feet of standing water. It was a difficult project to finance, because banks weren't interested in the neighborhood because people weren't interested in the neighborhood because nothing had happened there. It was dirt. It was nothing. It was nowhere. And so we just started imagining, what else could happen in this building? (Applause)
08:33	And so now that the rumor of my block has spread, and lots of people are starting to visit, we've found that the bank can now be a center for exhibition, archives, music performance, and that there are people who are now interested in being adjacent to those buildings because we brought some heat, that we kind of made a fire.
08:52	One of the archives that we'll have there is this Johnson Publishing Corporation. We've also started to collect memorabilia from American history, from people who live or have lived in that neighborhood. Some of these images are degraded images of black people, kind of histories of very challenging content, and where better than a neighborhood with young people who are constantly asking themselves about their identity to talk about some of the complexities of race and class?
09:22	In some ways, the bank represents a hub, that we're trying to create a pretty hardcore node of cultural activity, and that if we could start to make multiple hubs and connect some cool green stuff around there, that the buildings that we've purchased and rehabbed, which is now around 60 or 70 units, that if we could land miniature Versailles on top of that, and connect these buildings by a beautiful greenbelt – (Applause) – that this place where people never wanted to be would become an important destination for folk from all over the country and world.
10:04	In some ways, it feels very much like I'm a potter, that we tackle the things that are at our wheel, we try with the skill that we have to think about this next bowl that I want to make. And it went from a bowl to a singular house to a block to a neighborhood to a cultural district to thinking about the city, and at every point, there were things that I didn't know that I had to learn. I've never learned so much about zoning law in my life. I never thought I'd have to. But as a result of that, I'm finding that there's not just room for my own artistic practice, there's room for a lot of other artistic practices.
10:43	So people started asking us, "Well, Theaster, how are you going to go to scale?" and, "What's your sustainability plan?"
10:49	(Laughter) (Applause)
10:54	And what I found was that I couldn't export myself, that what seems necessary in cities like Akron, Ohio, and Detroit, Michigan, and Gary, Indiana, is that there are people in those places who already believe in those places, that are already dying to make those places beautiful, and that often, those people who are passionate about a place are disconnected from the resources necessary to make cool things happen, or disconnected from a contingency of people that could help make things happen. So now, we're starting to give advice around the country on how to start with what you got, how to start with the things that are in front of you, how to make something out of nothing, how to reshape your world at a wheel or at your block or at the scale of the city.
11:42	Thank you so much.
11:44	(Applause)
11:51	June Cohen: Thank you. So I think many people watching this will be asking themselves the question you just raised at the end: How can they do this in their own city? You can't export yourself. Give us a few pages out of your playbook about what someone who is inspired about their city can do to take on projects like yours?

12:08	Theaster Gates: One of the things I've found that's really important is giving thought to not just the kind of individual project, like an old house, but what's the relationship between an old house, a local school, a small bodega, and is there some kind of synergy between those things? Can you get those folk talking? I've found that in cases where neighborhoods have failed, they still often have a pulse. How do you identify the pulse in that place, the passionate people, and then how do you get folk who have been fighting, slogging for 20 years, reenergized about the place that they live? And so someone has to do that work. If I were a traditional developer, I would be talking about buildings alone, and then putting a "For Lease" sign in the window. I think that you actually have to curate more than that, that there's a way in which you have to be mindful about, what are the businesses that I want to grow here? And then, are there people who live in this place who want to grow those businesses with me? Because I think it's not just a cultural space or housing; there has to be the recreation of an economic core. So thinking about those things together feels right.
13:20	JC: It's hard to get people to create the spark again when people have been slogging for 20 years. Are there any methods you've found that have helped break through?
13:28	TG: Yeah, I think that now there are lots of examples of folk who are doing amazing work, but those methods are sometimes like, when the media is constantly saying that only violent things happen in a place, then based on your skill set and the particular context, what are the things that you can do in your neighborhood to kind of fight some of that? So I've found that if you're a theater person, you have outdoor street theater festivals. In some cases, we don't have the resources in certain neighborhoods to do things that are a certain kind of splashy, but if we can then find ways of making sure that people who are local to a place, plus people who could be supportive of the things that are happening locally, when those people get together, I think really amazing things can happen.
14:14	JC: So interesting. And how can you make sure that the projects you're creating are actually for the disadvantaged and not just for the sort of vegetarian indie movie crowd that might move in to take advantage of them.
14:26	TG: Right on. So I think this is where it starts to get into the thick weeds.
14:31	JC: Let's go there. TG: Right now, Grand Crossing is 99 percent black, or at least living, and we know that maybe who owns property in a place is different from who walks the streets every day. So it's reasonable to say that Grand Crossing is already in the process of being something different than it is today. But are there ways to think about housing trusts or land trusts or a mission-based development that starts to protect some of the space that happens, because when you have 7,500 empty lots in a city, you want something to happen there, but you need entities that are not just interested in the development piece, but entities that are interested in the stabilization piece, and I feel like often the developer piece is really motivated, but the other work of a kind of neighborhood consciousness, that part doesn't live anymore. So how do you start to grow up important watchdogs that ensure that the resources that are made available to new folk that are coming in are also distributed to folk who have lived in a place for a long time.
15:35	JC: That makes so much sense. One more question: You make such a compelling case for beauty and the importance of beauty and the arts. There would be others who would argue that funds would be better spent on basic services for the disadvantaged. How do you combat that viewpoint, or come against it?
15:52	TG: I believe that beauty is a basic service. (Applause) Often what I have found is that when there are resources that have not been made available to certain under-resourced cities or neighborhoods or communities, that sometimes culture is the thing that helps to ignite, and that I can't do everything, but I think that there's a way in which if you can start with culture and get people kind of reinvested in their place, other kinds of adjacent amenities start to grow, and then people can make a demand that's a poetic demand, and the political demands that are necessary to wake up our cities, they also become very poetic.
16:40	JC: It makes perfect sense to me. Theaster, thank you so much for being here with us today. Thank you. Theaster Gates.
16:46	(Applause)