

Exploring Foreclosure Through Art

By Lillian M. Ortiz

FOllowing the burst of the housing bubble in the late 2000s, millions of homeowners across the United States came face to face with foreclosure.

Given that foreclosure is an emotional and often dramatic experience, it isn't a surprise that some have turned to art to explore its aftermath.

Projecting Pain—and Power

In the past 8 to 10 years, City Life/Vida Urbana (CLVU)—a 40-year-old community organization—has increasingly incorporated artwork into its rallies and protests. Artists working in various mediums have approached the group with visual ideas to promote CLVU's mission of fighting for tenant rights and preventing housing displacement in the Boston area, says organizing coordinator Steve Meacham.

"Our participants, our leadership team, our staff, are all drawn from people who came to us first with problems. Our whole structure reflects people who have been through some serious stuff," Meacham says. "The civil disobedience that we do constantly draws artists."

That especially took off after the foreclosure crisis. CLVU, a grassroots organization, launched the Post-Foreclosure Eviction Defense campaign in 2007, which helped people facing foreclosure stay in their homes. But several dramatic art installations helped solidify the organization in people's minds.

Perhaps the most popular was a shadow projection series by artist John Hulsey, which began in 2010. The project, called *72 Hours*, was a movie of sorts where shadowy

silhouettes of people were projected onto the windows of foreclosed homes subject to eviction blockades and of empty bank-owned houses in neighborhoods like Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, and Dorchester, according to Hulsey's website. The scenes depicted real families retelling and re-enacting what happened after they received a 72-hour eviction notice.

According to Hulsey's website, "Transforming private neighborhoods into public arenas for debate, the projections may create spaces in which new solutions can be reached . . . They seek to put pressure on the banks by making human absences visible and felt."

Two years later, in a project called *Letters to Bank of America*, Hulsey audiotaped evicted residents reading letters they wrote to bank representatives and political leaders about their experiences with foreclosure and eviction. He then played the audio while the letters were projected onto the outside wall of bank branches that owned the families' mortgages.

"They're very emotional [letters]," Meacham says. "The words are projected on the wall . . . but instead of normal sentences, [certain] words are emphasized so they're bigger. Watching it you could almost feel the cadence of the speaker."

The two projects helped get the word out about City Life/Vida Urbana because it made protests creative and exciting, Meacham says. It also didn't hurt that several publications, including *The New York Times*, reported on the public installation, which led the publication to also report on the crises foreclosed-upon Boston families were facing. While CLVU has been around for decades, Meacham says the coverage made more people want to attend the group's rallies and protests.

Other artists have come in to help too. In the summer of 2011, Jorge Diaz, who previously lived in Boston but now works from Puerto Rico, created a puppet called "Count Bankula," which has been a prominent part of City Life/Vida Urbana rallies. Diaz also helped the group construct about 30 colorful, high-impact protest signs that are constant fixtures at rallies because they stand out, even in crowds of 1,000 people, Meacham says.

Pieces like those help crystallize complex ideas into simple statements.

"[Art] allows us to visually create different tones . . . So much of our struggle has become not only about people's

In *72 Hours*, developed by artist John Hulsey,

Bostonians were invited to retell their stories by acting them out in shadow play format, video of which was then projected through the windows of foreclosed homes during an eviction blockade, or through the windows of empty, bank-owned homes.





In Minneapolis and Boston, artists explore the losses (and gains) of foreclosure with work that supports advocacy and community building.

homes, and not only about people learning their legal rights, but also kind of more what their moral role in the world is," says Meacham, "a more collective sense of morality that is expressed in people's love and solidarity with each other."

The Ghosts of Minneapolis

As she walked into the south Minneapolis home she had only been able to admire from the outside, Molly Van Avery couldn't quite wrap her head around what she was feeling. The longtime Minneapolis resident would never have believed that she'd be able to afford such a beautiful, big residence as a single woman living on an artist's salary. But the recently foreclosed house was part of the City of Lakes Community Land Trust, which gave Van Avery the opportunity to purchase an affordable home in a city she loved so much.

Van Avery's uneasy feelings weren't so much associated with the purchase as they were with the family who no longer called the home their own. Their photographs still hung on the walls, children's toys were strewn about the floors, and food rotted away in the kitchen. The scenes haunted her. When the family last left the home, did they know they weren't coming back?

Van Avery found herself consumed with thoughts of racial justice, fairness, and access because the African-American family who had lived in the home represented the demographic hit hardest by the collapse of the Minneapolis housing market. She began to think about what it meant for her to benefit from someone else's loss.

"What does it mean for a white person to take this house through crisis from a Black woman who was very targeted consciously by aggressive lending practices in this city?" she wondered. (Van Avery said she bought her home for less than half of what the previous owners, an African-American family, had paid.)

For years, Van Avery, a longtime poet, tried to get her feelings on paper, but she never knew what to say other than that she was extremely grateful for the home.

About three years after moving in, Van Avery came to the realization that she needed to talk to other land trust homeowners about this tension. Van Avery, the founder of Poetry for People, has always appreciated poetry's long history of addressing difficult issues. She knew poetry needed to be part of this process.

She then remembered that one of her friends, visual artist Witt Siasoco, had worked on a project about an abandoned house in his neighborhood. Siasoco created a

Letters written by homeowners who faced foreclosure were projected onto the front façades of various Bank of America branch buildings in Boston in 2012. The project, called *Letters to Bank of America*, was developed by artist John Hulsey in collaboration with members of City Life/Vida Urbana.

So much of our struggle has become not only about people's homes, and not only about people learning their legal rights, but more what their moral role in the world is.

selected to work with eight land trust homeowners. But before they could meet, the artists had to learn about land trusts so they could fully grasp the residents' stories.

The City of Lakes Community Land Trust, which has been in existence since 2002, has helped put families in more than 200 homes in Minneapolis. The goal of the land trust is to create perpetually affordable homeownership opportunities for low- and moderate-income families. The land trust purchases properties and then sells the homes to low- to moderate-income families, but retains ownership of the land. Because the cost of land is not included in the home's purchase price, residents who might not have had the ability to purchase a home can do so. (There are resale price restrictions to keep the homes affordable for future owners, and often some initial subsidies put into the house as well.) CLCLT buys houses on the open

market or from partner developers who have rehabbed vacant residences. Since the foreclosure crisis, many of the houses have a foreclosure in their history.

"I didn't know about the land trust before this project," Siasoco said. "I thought it was fantastic and I wish I would have gotten involved before ... I think it's a totally radical model and I'm a huge, huge admirer of it."

After the lesson on land trusts, it was time to share. CLCLT homeowners invited the artists into their homes for a meal and a conversation about what the house meant to them. That meeting led to the creation of the poems, which

sign in the home's front yard that prompted passers-by to think about whether the house should be demolished or saved. (The home was eventually demolished, which still makes Siasoco uneasy because preservation is extremely important to him.) The visual piece, as well as the use of a private space for a public forum, inspired Van Avery. In

2015, she and Siasoco teamed up to work on a visual and poetic public project about previously foreclosed homes in Minneapolis, and what it means for families who now call the once-vacant properties home.

Wanting to get in touch with other land trust homeowners who purchased previously foreclosed homes, Van Avery and Siasoco approached Staci Horwitz, the program director of the City of Lakes Community Land Trust, early last year with the public art proposal. Horwitz was immediately sold on the idea.

Van Avery and Siasoco secured funding from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council and Forecast Public Art, and six poets were

were displayed in their front yards on a visual piece created by Siasoco—think of a for-sale sign, but much more beautiful and colorful. The connection to a realty sign led to the project being named *This House Is Not for Sale*.

"There was just so much gratitude that people have for the land trust and for their home," Van Avery says. "Because they are land trust homes, people feel like they are stewards of it for a while ... I think it's a different way of viewing homeownership and [rethinking] the traditional route of the American dream."

One resident focused her thoughts on the history of her home, and the spirits that still linger within it. In response, poet Sun Yung Shin authored, "O Incarnate Spirits that Pass Through this Canopied Arch Made of Day and Night," which in part reads:

"Not for the absence of bison, child, or blackbird—when the living and dead / Cleave to the junctions of this immigrant room, spirits rock the air like a chair. Time's surprising elegy wants this and that dusk, orchard of souls."

In "Until Rapture Melancholy," poet J. Otis Powell writes about the idea that owning property doesn't matter; life is really about one's soul. The poem focused on mortality, which the poet and the homeowners grappled with during the time the project was underway.

"Inside we struggle for relief
And lose our minds trying
To accept this as our permanent
Address
We think we know how we
Arrived here with all our stuff
But sometimes we're not sure which
Narrative is true"

In "All a House Can Hold," poet Tish Jones writes about an inviting homeowner and the idea of remembering a place.

"How many mothers' stories have been
a basement deep start for this house to affirm
foundations?
...
Here is where children will come to be cradled
by the colors of their ancestors and the images
of tribe. If you have been here you belong here.
Welcome."

Over the course of several weeks, each homeowner hosted an open community event where the sign was unveiled. Each event had its own feel and flavor—homeowners offered a range of items to the community, from homemade foods and desserts, to music and tarot card readings.

"It was really amazing," Horwitz says. "I live in North Minneapolis so you tend to see a lot of things being

RESOURCES

Community Land Trusts
nhi.org/go/89370

"This House is Not For Sale,"
by Jennifer Sturtz.
City of Lakes Community
Land Trust. Feb. 18, 2016.
nhi.org/go/26785

"Putting a Spotlight on
the Families of Foreclosure,"
by John Leland and Lisa laboni.
The New York Times,
March 21, 2010.
nhi.org/go/23829

taken away in your community and to see this bring people together from all different avenues and from all different relationships and different interactions and being able to represent some of the key things that our homeowners valued was . . . very humbling . . . It just was very powerful—individually, community[wise], and organizationally.”

Van Avery said she and her team did not reach out to former owners of the homes because they felt it might be too sensitive a topic, and it could invite difficult and mixed emotions for the previous homeowners. “If we were to do another round of this project, we would be braver and more aware of the positive and powerful impact of the signs,” she says.

Looking back, Van Avery loves how everything worked out, even though she had expected the poems and images to be a bit more political and address questions of race and class more directly. “But what happened is, I think, more beautiful,” she says. “These poems are just stunning pieces of work.”

Looking Ahead

While the *This House Is Not For Sale* events have long since ended, Siasoco and Van Avery say they still see people walk by the signs to read the poetry. “When you put artwork in your yard, it’s kind of like a beacon for conversations that continue on,” says Siasoco. “I think that’s super important in the way that art can really contribute to a larger society.”

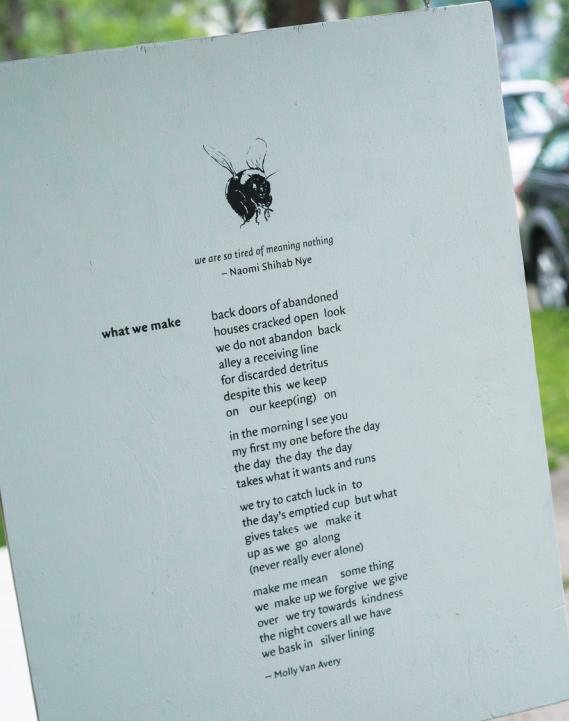
Van Avery, who is constantly looking for ways to include art in the public realm, loves when she sees someone read the poem in front of her home.

“They look at the poem and then they look at the house. They look at the poem and then look at the house . . . people are reading poetry because of this,” she says.

Along with the local attention, the project has garnered national recognition as well. This past summer, Americans for the Arts—a nonprofit organization that works to advance arts and arts education—announced that it had named “This Home Is Not For Sale” one of 38 outstanding public art projects created in 2015.

The project was a huge undertaking and while he’ll most likely be unable to participate again, Siasoco wants it to continue in some form or another. He hopes an organization takes it on, either by having an artist and poet work with other land trust homeowners, or by developing the project even further. For example, Siasoco initially wanted to create a service where homeowners could have their signs changed regularly. There’s exciting potential in showing artwork to the public in private settings, he says. “Molly and I have talked about trying to make a resource guide so that people can be empowered enough to do it on their own.”

Van Avery says the resource guide could be similar to one the Little Free Library offers that contains



step-by-step guidance for those who want to start a free book exchange in their community.

Horwitz says CLCLT has left it up to Van Avery and Siasoco to decide what they’d want to do next. But the conversations are ongoing.

“Do you kind of just leave it as it was, an amazing project that turned out really well? One thing they were trying to figure out was . . . how to use the space that has been created . . . to become a permanent public display,” rotating different works of art in and out, Horwitz says.

Over in Boston, there aren’t as many families facing foreclosure as there were in the late 2000s, except for some areas in the southern part of the city. However, most neighborhoods are currently experiencing the hardships associated with a hot market, Meacham says. Boston has been labeled as the city worst hit by gentrification in the country, according to The Cleveland Federal Reserve, and that has meant huge rent increases.

“We are seeing every single neighborhood getting hundreds of dollars in rent increases as landlords discover that they can do that,” Meacham says.

Also, the Brookings Institution reported that Boston has the third highest rate of income inequality among the 50 biggest U.S. cities. Low wages have exacerbated the housing crisis, Meacham says.

Because of these issues, the art pieces the organization has collected through the years are still being used to rally against absentee and corporate landlords, as well as rent increases and displacement. And Meacham expects artists to continue to reach out to CLVU in the future.

“[Art] is an outreach mechanism,” he says. “It gets notoriety and publicity and attention that you wouldn’t get otherwise.”

A poem by artist and land trust homeowner Molly Van Avery, who spearheaded the *This Home Is Not For Sale* project in 2015.

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