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| STORYTELLERS: Jason Reblando

| A student's examination of a Chicago public housing development reveals a common thread and offers a path for artistic growth.

As Jason Reblando prepares for his final semester of grad school at Chicago's Columbia College, he reflects on his *Outside Public Housing* series, one of his first transformative photographic projects, which not only gave him insights into the present conditions of public housing but also to his own personal photographic perspective.

With a background in sociology and an interest in power structures, during an early course in documentary photography Reblando decided to focus on a narrative connecting urban planning, community organizing and Chicago's public housing situation. "Public housing has been an integral part of Chicago history and urban landscape," he points out, "I think that's a very important story to tell, but I wanted to take a step backwards and examine the lives of those whose work relied in some way on [this program]."

Initially, *Outside Public Housing* was to be based on portraits of housing residents, whom Reblando met through his earlier portrait series, *Youth Boxers*. He reveals, "I wanted to know about the city and the neighborhoods, [so] not knowing anyone, I walked into the field house (community center) and told them I was a student." As he spent time among the residents, discussions turned to the issue of life in the projects and the displacement then taking place as old high-rises were torn down and replaced with mixed-income townhouses. "The residents wishes weren't being addressed at all," Reblando expresses, "and although poverty existed it was more than just misery, it was their home."

With curiosity and an attitude of discovery, Reblando set out to examine "who was moving around the chess pieces" causing the displacement. What he discovered was a deeper

connection between the plight of the community and those considered the decision makers. "As things were being demolished, they were ruining residents lives," he explains, "but everyone was just making a living." This series grew to include portraits of real estate agents, social workers, bureaucrats and construction laborers whose lives were all intertwined with the housing development project. "For example, the demolition worker clears the land for the construction worker, who is building the new houses that the real estate agent will sell," he says, "it's a complex web and more often than not, the residents are completely left out of the decision-making process, which relates back to my interest in power structures."

Reblando documented the people and places within the series using a handheld 35mm Nikon. Each portrait he made garnered a distinct response from the individual photographed. Kinami Cotton, a freelance rehab worker, was forthcoming about his life and his work during the portrait session, while photographing Mildred Culver, the real estate agent, required several levels of management approvals before the portrait was approved. Each session lasted as long as the time that could be spared away from the individual's work. "I try to earn the trust of my subjects by being straight with them and spending as much time as I can," says Reblando. "I think the common thread [between them was] that everyone had a job to do, and they were [all] pretty surprised that someone besides their boss was taking interest in their work."

While all the images in this series were made during a five-month period when this particular community was transforming, Reblando has since continued to explore this central theme in newer projects, resulting in the series' *Lathrop Homes* and *New Deal Utopias*. As he shifts focus in this newer work to develop increasingly open ended projects, he places a greater commitment on aesthetics and conceptual thinking as well. "I'm

broadening my concept from solely public housing to the utopian aspirations of urban planners," he explains. "*New Deal Utopias* examines three planned communities built during the Great Depression. It's challenging me to stretch myself conceptually and photographically, but I would never have gotten to [this] without *Outside Public Housing*."

- Elizabeth Barragan