



Paola Aguirre Serrano, *Overton*, Courtesy of Borderless Studio, 2018 Photo by Ben Kolak

Visiting Artist Series Resource Guide: Paola Aguirre Serrano

Her twitter bio reads *“Sometimes architect. Passionate urban designer”*. Her studio’s work, however, lies beyond the realm of easy classification. She describes her studio as a *“research and design practice focused on connecting communities to design processes and cultivating collaborative design agency”*.

I like to think of her work as a form of design based community organizing. In her *Overton* project for example (shown above), she addresses the issue of repurposing closed Chicago Public Schools. Part design project, part installation art, this project utilizes a larger than life map of Chicago that was painted in the parking lot of the former Anthony Overton Elementary School, highlighting the locations of over 45 CPS schools by neighborhood that have closed since 2013 due to budget cuts. This large scale interactive map (you can walk on it) is a tool used to reveal. It is also used by the design team as a tool to spark dialog about school closures, and solicit inclusive responses regarding the future repurposing of these structures. In this project, a map, an art installation, becomes the catalyst to instigate dialog, inclusivity and collaboration around the difficult and politically charged topic of school closures.

This project is also an example of relationship building through design. At the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the neighborhood around Anthony Overton School, located in Bronzeville, quickly became a food desert as grocery stores large and small closed. The relationships that were established during the *Overton* project were used to quickly deploy a rapid response food distribution pop-up at the same site. This led to the establishment of a larger scale network of food distributions sites.

As a result of her work, Paola was recently awarded a distinguished service award from the American Institute of Architects for her “work with local community members to advocate for neighborhoods through her various programs, exhibitions and initiatives”. She is a member of the Open City Network and more recently a founding member of the newly formed Design Trust, a nonprofit focusing on collaborative endeavors between designers, community partners, and policy makers.

Is this Architecture? Urban Design? Community Organizing? Installation Art? However you may want to classify it, her work uses design to bring people together. It is creative, collaborative, and deeply impactful.

- Mark Pearson

Artist Bio:

Paola Aguirre Serrano is founder of BORDERLESS — a Chicago-based urban design and research practice focused on cultivating collaborative design agency through interdisciplinary projects. With emphasis on exchange and communication across disciplines, Borderless explores creative civic design and engagement interventions that address the complexity of urban systems and social equity by looking at intersections between architecture, urban design, infrastructure, landscape, planning and community participatory processes. Paola is an active educator, and currently teaches architecture at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has taught urban design at the Sam Fox School of Design Washington University in St. Louis and social impact design at Archeworks.

She has been acknowledged by Next City Vanguard's 40 Under 40 (2016), Impact Design Hub's 40 Under 40 (2017), Newcity Design 50: Who Shapes Chicago, Emerging Planner Award by the American Planning Association – Illinois Chapter (2018), Field Foundation Civic Leader for Racial Equity (2019), Chicago United for Equity Fellow 2019, and recently appointed by the City of Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot as Commissioner of Chicago Landmarks and member of the Cultural Advisory Council. Paola received a M. of Architecture degree in Urban Design from the Harvard School of Design.

Links:

Borderless Studio: <https://www.borderless-studio.com/>

Open City Workshop: <https://www.cityopenworkshop.org/>

Overton Video (Creative Grounds): <https://vimeo.com/319000283>

Creative Grounds: <https://www.creativegrounds.org/>

Chicago Design Trust: <https://www.designtrustchicago.org/>

Architect's Newspaper Article (on the Chicago Design Trust):
<https://www.archpaper.com/2020/12/design-trust-chicago-seeks-to-address-systems-beyond-structures/>

Architect Magazine, Next Progressives: https://www.architectmagazine.com/practice/borderless-studio_o

Architect Magazine, "Borderless Studio Is All About Building Community" Podcast:
https://www.architectmagazine.com/practice/borderless-studio-is-all-about-building-community_o

Twitter: @borderless_MXUS

Instagram: @borderless_studio