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How Artist Brendan Fernandes Is Decolonizing Architecture Without Tearing It Down

'Build Up the House' on the façade of Chicago's MART Building is a way of shining a light on "past narratives and experiences that need to find change."

By Gameli Hamel • 10/10/24 11:58am



Right now, across the 2.5-acre façade of Chicago's MART Building, a projection shows dancing silhouettes. Titled *Build Up the House*, it is the work of Chicago-based Kenya-born Indian-Canadian multidisciplinary artist and choreographer Brendan Fernandes, who explores issues like race, queer culture, migration and protest through installation and dance performances.

The work is a new commission by Fernandes, who was chosen as the headline artist for the fall season of ART on THE MART on Chicago's Riverwalk. His piece, according to a statement, explores "through the visual language of projecting "new" doorways and windows, the idea of decolonizing architecture and creating new trajectories of accessibility."

The ART on THE MART commission coincides with *In Two*, a new dance performance by Fernandes in collaboration with the Pulitzer Arts Foundation. His work has also been included in other major exhibitions, like "Movements Toward Freedom" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver and "The Future is Present, The Harbinger is Home" at Prospect New Orleans, which will open in November.

Observer caught up with Fernandes to learn more about his practice and his recent and upcoming work.

Your work has been described as often taking on hybrid forms: part ballet, part queer dance party, part political protest. Can you break that down?

My work is hybrid in that it can be many things materially and conceptually. I see my work between the intersections of ideas and things, and at times, it can be a sculptural installation combined with ballet or some type of movement. I like my work to be between spaces where they are not always defined. I think of this as being "Queer" outside of the moniker of gender and sexual binaries. My work is not ever one static thing or idea.

I come to this from my complex experiences of my cultural identity as a Kenyan, Canadian and Indian living in the U.S. I also come to this from my past life as a ballet dancer and movement maker where I have melded my visual art practice with my dance life and background. My political experiences in counter cultures, such as punk rock, also fuel how I think and propel the nuanced ways my works manifest. I consider my work as always in flux and it is ever-changing and evolving.

What do you hope people experience when they see *Build Up the House*? How did you conceptualize this work, and what's the idea behind it?

I believe that we continue to live in precarious times, and the inspiration for my ART on THE MART project is to gather and bring people together to dance as a community, finding joy and being in solidarity. I want my ART on THE MART commission to give people who experience it a moment of an impromptu dance party. Chicago is celebrating its 40th anniversary of House Music, and this community is one that supports and celebrates diversity and inclusivity where music gives people a space to come and dance together. The sound is a collaboration with Chicago's house DJ and musician Shaun J Wright.

Bodies dancing together for me is a form of expressing joy and freedom. For me, it is a metaphor for how we need to engage and act within our everyday social politics. The beginning of the animation depicts scaffolding to symbolize a space in flux, one that is being repaired or built up. This then continues to a section where portals—windows and doors—open onto the architecture of the Merchandise Mart creating "new" openings symbolizing new ways of seeing out of from and walking through. Dancers appear and move across and around the space and as the beats of the house music build up the scenes behind the dancers become more rich and vibrant in color. Many of the patterns showcase West African textiles made up of flowers and plants. The ending of the piece is a rich mixture of bodies dancing and supporting each other within cystoscopic floral patterns symbolizing a return to nature. In this return, we can think anew and start afresh.

What's the thinking around turning the building in the commission into a garden?

For me, the return to a garden and nature is a metaphor for going backward in time and questioning the past as a form of a new beginning. We started in nature and maybe if we can think in a utopian manner, then returning to that space will allow us to make changes to grow again so we can foster a sense of optimism and a way to consider a new future possibility. The space of nature also acknowledges Indigenous communities and the ways that these people support and respect the land we inhabit. I think we need to listen to the land that we live on and collaborate with it more.

Can you expand on decolonizing architecture across the Western world and creating new trajectories of accessibility?

When I think about decolonizing architecture, it is not about dismantling a system or structure in a physical sense but finding growth to rebuild within what already exists. When I look at historical institutions and buildings like museums, for example, instead of demolishing them from the ground down, I think we should use them as reminders of past narratives and experiences that need to find change. I believe we need to make that change and rethink from within.

Again, scaffolding is a metaphor for this action, and when I say we must create new doorways and windows within that architecture, I am asking us to find new ways, physically and metaphorically, to walk into a space or to look outwardly out of that space. This creates accessibility and allows for a new way to think and experience the space. It opens up the space to allow people to enter and be a part of it in a new way.

Can you talk about your new dance performance in collaboration with the Pulitzer Arts Foundation?

I am still in bliss from the whole experience, which was only a few days ago [in early September]. The work is a collaborative piece, or a duet as I would like to call it, between my work and the legacy of Scott Burton. My work is immersed and placed inside a retrospective of Burton's sculpture and ephemera. Like me, Burton made work that has a synergy and collaboration between the live performing body and sculpture. For this show, I made a series of curtains and soft sculptures at the Fabric Workshop Museum.

The curtains take the markings of my finger swipes from my cell phone screen while on gay dating applications. These become bodily gestures that reference a new form of cruising, but I also interpret them as directional marks that can also be interpreted as a lyrical dance score. Burton also made his performance works as duets and so in the live performances, my dancers are cruising the space, looking and trying to find each other while interacting with the stone sculpture of Burton but also with my soft curtain and a set of sculptures that look like rock but are pillows. These interactions for me are duets, whether two bodies coming together or a body interaction with a stone Burton or my soft sculptural piece. The exchange is intimate and evokes the bodily sentiments of gay cruising. The work is about visibility and supporting and caring for one another.

What can you share about your upcoming performance at Prospect New Orleans?

My work for Prospect 6 is not new but a re-performance of a piece I created in 2018 for Nuit Blanche Toronto. The work is about police systems that seemingly are visible in urban spaces but most often don't support or protect marginalized communities. The piece came out of a moment in Toronto's history when the Queer community conflicted with the police. In response, I created a space where "Police" cars rented from a movie studio create a formation between and around a stage where queer and POC DJs played music and we asked the greater Toronto community to gather and dance in a critical mass of solidarity. We danced in joy and honor of our freedom but the animation of the disco and party were the flashing lights of the police sirens. The work is about finding freedom but asking the critical mass to stop and think about why we are celebrating under the flashing lights of law enforcement, a system that needs reform in my mind.

For Prospect 6, we will close out the triennial with *On Flashing Lights*. The piece will have a much different resonance in New Orleans and so I am working with many local Queer and POC allies from the city to create this work for Prospect 6. As a lead-up to the dance party, I will gather people's voices through a prompt that asks, "What song makes you feel free on the dance floor?" We will take the responses and make a playlist of songs that we will share and

give out. I hope these songs of freedom will allow us to continue dancing in many different spaces.