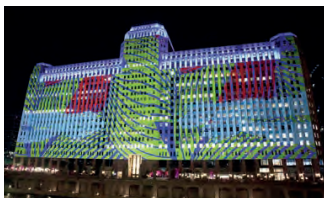


BUILD UP THE HOUSE

Brendan Fernandes celebrates 40 years of house music with Art on the Mart's latest installation

Words Oliver Webb

Fernandes' *Build Up the House* is the site's most recent art installation in its Art on the Mart project



In October 1929, one year into the construction of the Merchandise Mart, the American stock market crashed, marking the beginning of the Great Depression. Set to become the world's largest building at that time, the Mart cost an estimated \$26m and

was an impressive 3.7 million sq ft, spanning two city blocks and rising 25 stories. Opening its doors on 5 May 1930, the final product was a reflection of Chicago's art deco style of the period.

Originally consisting of 13 different warehouses, the building was converted into government offices during World War II. After the war, the Mart was purchased by Joseph P Kennedy and, throughout the late forties and fifties, the building became the single largest producer of trade shows in the United States. Throughout the subsequent decades, the building underwent a series of renovations and, in 2016, new additions included Marshall's Landing restaurant, cafe and lounge, a fitness centre, a food hall and a 5000 sq ft river park along the Chicago River.

In 2018, the Art on the Mart programme was introduced. The project employs cutting-edge video mapping techniques to transform the architectural landmark into one of the largest permanent digital art platforms in the world. The installation, 30 years in the making, aims to provide public access to contemporary art for all visitors of Chicago's iconic Riverwalk. Artists who have contributed to the programme include Yuge Zhou, Nick Cave, Barbara Kruger and Diana Thater. Additionally, the Art Institute of Chicago has a close partnership with Art on the Mart and, as part of this collaboration, the legacies of iconic artists like Frida Kahlo, Claude Monet and Andy Warhol have all been celebrated by showcasing their works.

Artists have 2.5 acres of projection surface to play with across the southern façade of the Mart, equal to the size of roughly two American football fields. To help bring instalments to life, a quarter of a mile of fibre wires are embedded under the river, connecting projections to a custom-designed, weatherproof box built directly into the Riverwalk. More than ten speakers are installed across the Riverwalk for each projection and 34

Christie Boxer 4K30s are employed to project the artworks, with a resolution of 6000x2620 pixels. Over a million lumens are projected, approximately the same amount of light needed for more than 25 movie theatres.

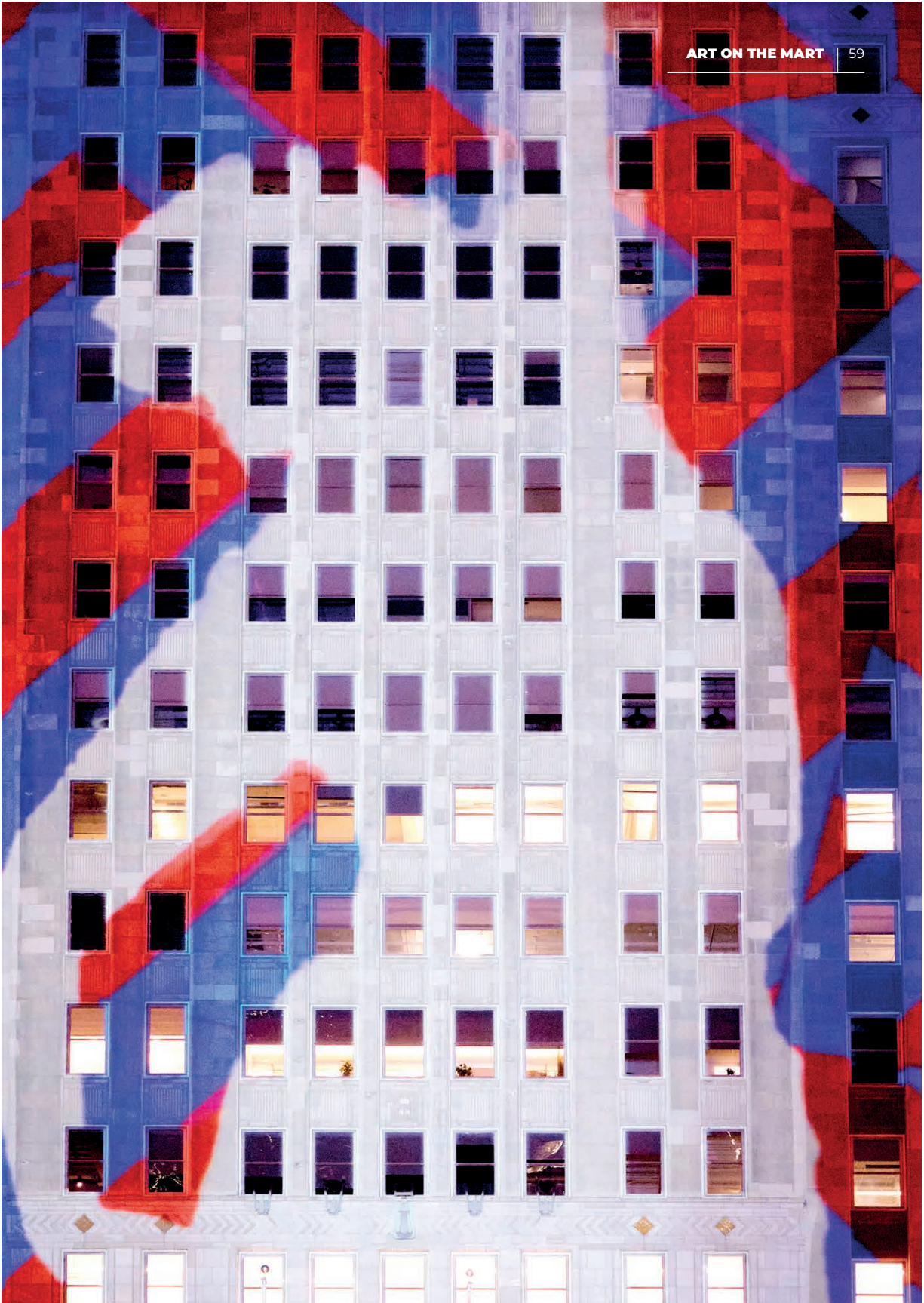
HOMAGE TO HOUSE

At time of writing, the Mart's most recent art installation is Brendan Fernandes' *Build Up the House*. Fernandes' work honours the essential contributions of African diasporic peoples to American art forms and is accompanied by a house music soundscape by Chicago-based producer Shaun J Wright to celebrate the 40th anniversary of house music. Using the movements of animated dancers to continuously reshape the façade of the building, Fernandes' work imagines new windows and doorways.

In 2016, Fernandes moved to Chicago from New York and began teaching at Northwestern University. It was there that he first met executive director of Art on the Mart Cynthia Noble.

"Years later, she asked me if I'd ever consider doing Art on the Mart," Fernandes begins. "There was a moment when people were questioning how an artist that strictly works with the body is going to translate what he does into this space. Time-based art in digital media has always been a part of what I do. I teach a class at Northwestern currently called Dance for Camera, about how the camera is a choreographic tool. Ways of making and considering technology alongside movement have also been a part of it, so I was really excited."

Fernandes' journey as an artist began at a young age. "I think I was always in tune with being an artist. I didn't know what else to do. As I went through high school, I started focusing more on art making as a method for social and political change," he says. "That carried its way into my work as a grad student and now as a professional artist. I got injured in my senior year of university and stopped dancing, so that's when I really began to focus on art, sculpture and printmaking. When I moved to New York to study in the Whitney Museum of American Art's independent study programme, I started to bring dance back into my work. Dance and art came together to support me." ●



Fernandes had been considering monuments and statues that represent a singular body, but not his or many other people's bodies. "I've been thinking about how we decolonise them, which in America right now means taking them down, but I've been exploring ways of challenging by altering," he explains. "In some of my work, I'm building mirrored structures around monuments within the city." One of these projects is *New Monuments Chicago*. For this, Fernandes designed a sculptural installation out of scaffolding and mirrors to place around the General John Alexander Logan Monument in Grant Park, Chicago. The installation challenges the complex history behind the subject.

When it came to *Build Up the House*, Fernandes knew the important role that the Mart plays in Chicago's history. "It's an institution; a massive building with its own zip code because it's so big," he says. "Buildings are institutional and have a presence, so to decolonise them I think about building up to create different ways of thinking and understanding. Physical interruptions of new doorways so we can walk through differently or introduce new accessibility. Altering windows as new ways of seeing out."

FOUR ON THE FLOOR

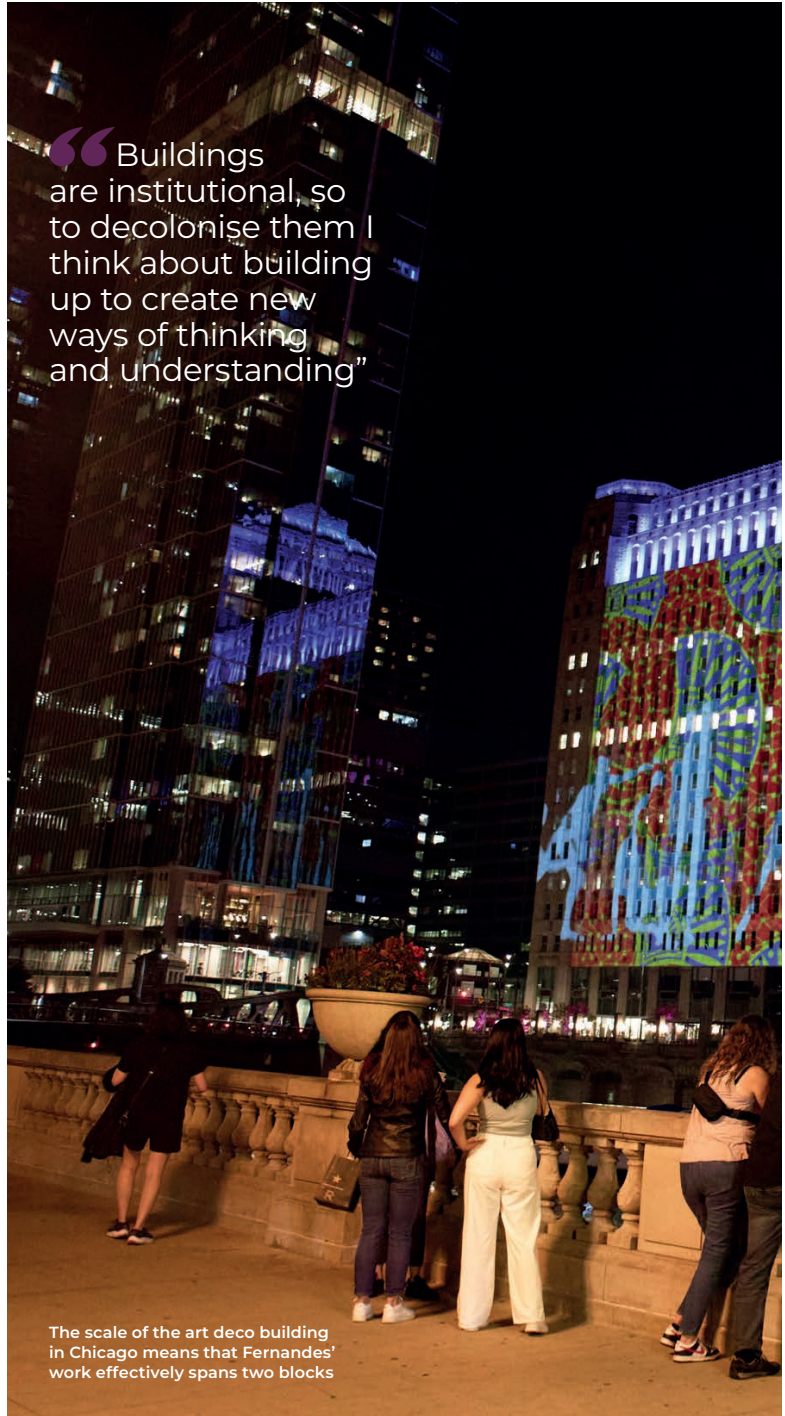
2024 commemorates the 40th anniversary of house music, and *Build Up the House* pays homage to the music genre. "Chicago is the birthplace of house music," adds Fernandes. "I wanted to play with the idea of building a new house – and a new house music – and challenging the building's façade by projecting this artwork on it that encourages new ways of seeing and interpreting. So as it becomes a visual spectacle of bodies dancing and moving, it also becomes a meeting space. People stop and gather to listen to the music. Every time it plays, it becomes a mini house dance party."

While the exact origins of the term 'house music' remain unclear, it's often attributed to The Warehouse nightclub where the unique sound first emerged. In Chicago's West Loop neighbourhood, The Warehouse played host to DJs such as Frankie Knuckles. Referred to as the 'godfather of house', it was there that Knuckles first spliced records together along to a four-on-the-floor pulse and with tempos ranging from 120 to 130 beats per minute.

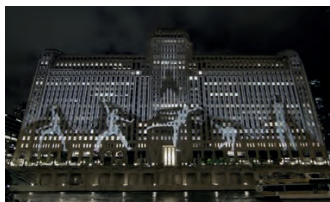
Other early pioneers of the genre included Larry Levan, Ron Hardy, J M Silk (aka Jack Master Silk), Chip E, Farley 'Jackmaster' Funk and Marshall Jefferson. In 1984, Vince Lawrence and Jesse Saunders released their song *On and On*, widely considered to be the first real house record. House music soon spread across the globe, with Saunders and Farley 'Jackmaster' Funk's *Love Can't Turn Around* peaking at number ten in the UK singles chart in 1986. A year later, Steve 'Silk' Hurley's *Jack Your Body* reached number one in the UK charts.

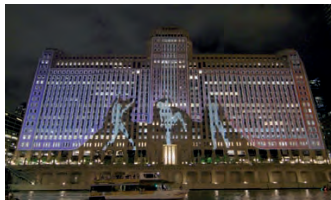
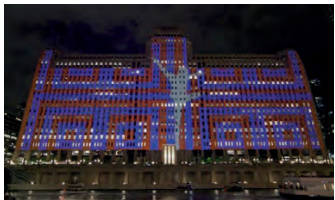
For *Build Up the House*, Shaun J Wright created a house music

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The scale of the art deco building in Chicago means that Fernandes' work effectively spans two blocks



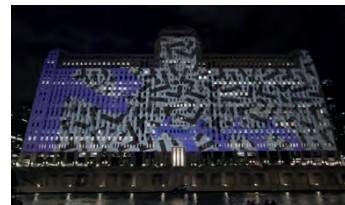
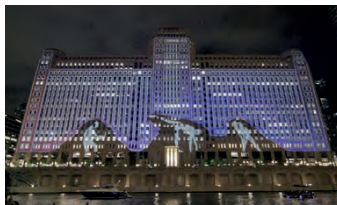
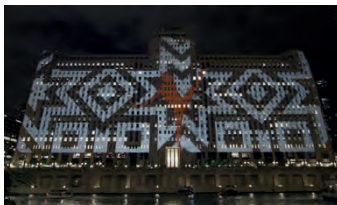




CREDITS

- Animation and post-production: Daily Planet
- Original music in collaboration with Shaun J Wright
- Produced by Domenic Del Carmine
- Danced by Katlin Michael Bourgeois and Lieana Sherry
- Photography by Matt Bruinooge

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The Build Up the House installation pays homage to house music, which is 40 years old this year

soundscape to accompany the art display Fernandes had designed. “I invited Shaun to be a part of the project,” says Fernandes. “He’s a good friend and I know his music well. I gave him a sense of what I wanted – we talked about using textiles and the connection to my African history and Kenyan heritage. Shaun decided to bring in some African beats partway through it. He even convinced me to sing on the piece, so my voice is actually featured, which I didn’t really want to do because I’m not normally a singer. Shaun is, but I love that he encouraged that little inclusion. I never usually put myself in my own work, but when I was instructing the dancers on how to do the hands, they also asked me to include my hands too. So I have these little cameos throughout the piece.”

BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY

Symmetry on the building face was something of which Fernandes was very conscious. “You also need to consider the projectors,” he goes on. “This is thinking about the labour of the actual projectors and the ambient lights of the city. Light is such a weird factor in cities depending on the season, so I’m grateful that it’s during autumn. We do get darkness at an earlier time of day, but we’re also in a bustling city.”

Fernandes also considered the colour palettes, as certain colours look better than others on the building. “Another factor is that photographic realism doesn’t project well on the building, which is why I choreographed the dancers in a green room and made them into silhouette composites – so it could be more graphic. I was really going through my graphic sensibilities – my love for textiles and patterns – and trying to challenge and understand the space.”

When it comes to projection mapping and digital art, Fernandes believes there will be much more of it in future. “I see it on buildings, especially for advertising,” he observes. “I think there will be these interventions of art spaces; I’m excited to play with it and create something that is an intervention to a new mass audience. You see more and more of it in our every day, often on phones, so it doesn’t have to be large scale, it can be small too.”

“I love Chicago and it’s my home,” concludes Fernandes. “There’s a sense of pride and acknowledgement that my community – the people in the city – are respecting and giving my work a platform on which to be seen. I’m personally extremely proud of the work – the way it has manifested and done what I wanted it to do for the project.”

“I’m especially grateful for the collaboration with Daily Planet and my producer, Domenic Del Carmine. It’s something I hope to do again in other iterations and forms. I love the time basis of it as well, that it’s an ephemeral, public thing. I hope it becomes a monument for that moment, but then changes and becomes something different.” ●

Learn more about Art on the Mart
artonthemart.com

