

An aerial photograph of a city grid, likely Los Angeles, showing a dense pattern of streets and buildings. The image is in black and white. Overlaid on the image is the text 'CITY PROJECT 1977' in large, bold, black letters. Below this, the text 'FOUR URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL SCULPTURES' is also in large, bold, black letters. Two small circles are drawn on the grid, highlighting specific areas. The overall composition is a high-angle, top-down view of the urban landscape.

# CITY PROJECT 1977

## FOUR URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL SCULPTURES

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FOUR URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL SCULPTURES

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A JOINT PROJECT OF CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY ART DEPARTMENT  
AND THE NEW GALLERY OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CLEVELAND, OHIO

## INTRODUCTION

In May and June, 1977, four nationally known artists created outdoor sculptures on several vacant inner city lots on Cleveland's East Side. Using rubble, lumber, sandbags and other readily available materials, each artist produced a semi-permanent work of environmental art directly on the site. The bulk of the needed physical labor was provided by volunteers: students and area residents – young and old; as the work progressed, an active dialogue developed between the artist and the surrounding community.

*City Project 1977* thus focused on the interaction between art, site and community, with the core of the project being in the process – in the making and experiencing of the new works. The artists selected were Lloyd Hamrol, Patricia Johanson, Charles Simonds and Robert Stackhouse. Although their works were stylistically diverse, the four artists shared a number of basic concepts. They were sensitive to both the physical and sociological character of the site and its environs. They wanted their works to be emblematic of art as an organizing esthetic force in the desolate urban landscape; and they hoped that the process of creating the art on location would provide the community with encouragement and challenge.

While the making of four environmental sculptures was the most important component of the *City Project*, several supporting activities were carried out concurrently with the site work. A documentary exhibition of site-specific art of the last fifteen years was shown at The New Gallery of Contemporary Art from May 14 through June 30 to provide a context for the sculptures being created. The site work and the exhibition were used to implement a number of educational programs ranging from elementary school to college level. These activities are described in greater detail in the final two sections of the catalog. Photo and video documentation of the *City Project* was presented at Cleveland State University in October, 1977.

### *The Inner City*

The city of Cleveland has two distinct centers of energy – a business hub located downtown and a cultural complex situated four miles to the east at University Circle. Between the two points lies the inner city. The relatively compact downtown area of high rise office buildings, housing corporate headquarters and financial institutions, extends about twenty blocks south from the lake and east

from the meandering Cuyahoga River. Eighty blocks to the east is University Circle, an impressive concentration of cultural, educational and medical facilities. Beyond University Circle the land rises toward the autonomous residential heights communities, some of which have retained their wealth and opulence to the present day. A predominantly white ethnic middle class populates much of the city west of the Cuyahoga as well as the sprawling western suburbs. A complex of steel mills blocks the downtown area to the south.

Between the eastern edge of downtown, formed by the campus of Cleveland State University, and the western boundary of University Circle lies a sixty block span which encompasses much of Cleveland's black ghetto. As with many American cities, this central part is in a state of advanced decay. Since the early sixties, random demolition of buildings has created hundreds of acres of vacant land for which there is no apparent use. Public housing construction or rehabilitation in the area has been negligible. While there has been some praiseworthy action by local groups to save pockets in the inner city – Rev. Roger S. Shoup and his Neighbors Organized for Action in Housing (NOAH); Sister Henrietta's efforts in the heart of Hough; and endeavors of the Superior-St. Clair Coalition, to name a few – only a small fraction of the overall need has been met. Parts of the inner city, as a result, are being depopulated.

Traversing the area from east to west are four major arteries: Chester, Euclid, Carnegie and Woodland Avenues. In the first decade of the century, fine homes lined these streets; today their most obvious function is to serve as corridors for commuter traffic. It is along two of these highly travelled avenues – Chester and Euclid – and in the thirty block span from East 55th to East 84th Street that the four *Project* sites are located.

### *History of the Project*

*City Project* was several years in the making. In 1974, Jan van der Meulen, the then new chairman of Cleveland State University's Art Department, addressed an eloquent plea to all regional arts community councils on behalf of outdoor environmental art in our deteriorating cities. He proposed that a new and non-threatening esthetic based on artistic re-evaluation of ubiquitous denlict materials be undertaken throughout the city.

*City Project 1977* began to take shape when, in early 1975, James Osher, a visiting lecturer at Cleveland State University, was given the responsibility to develop an Urban Art program. Recognizing that today's environmental sculptor was eminently suited to address himself to the task, Osher contacted a number of artists to explore their willingness to participate, brought several of them to Cleveland for a symposium, scoured the city for suitable sites, and had many outwardly promising but ultimately unproductive discussions with civic leaders.

The New Gallery joined forces with Cleveland State University in November of 1975 when it became apparent that a sharper focus for the project and financial support from a major funding agency were needed to get the program off the ground. Through the efforts of The New Gallery, a grant was first obtained from the National Endowment for the Arts and, subsequently, from the George Gund Foundation — the latter for the educational component of the project. Cleveland State University's Art Department secured supplementary grants from the Ohio Arts Council and the Noah Burkin Foundation. Contributions and donations of materials were also made by individuals and companies in the area as the project progressed. Once the funding base was established the project moved into high gear. One-year rent-free leases were negotiated for four selected sites; the artists visited Cleveland to develop their concepts and plans; and, finally, with the dedicated participation of Jim Osher and his students, work on the sites began in early May.

#### Community Involvement

*City Project* is as much about people and community involvement as it is about art. From the outset we realized the need to create public acceptance through direct contact with the community, as well as through the media. At the same time care had to be taken not to inflate the level of expectation beyond what the limited scope of *City Project* could achieve. In an effort to attain this delicate balance, Marvin Wright was hired as Community Coordinator in February, 1977, on the advice of Kenneth Snipes, Director of the Fairfax Foundation. Wright, a charismatic young man, had grown up in the area and was familiar with the needs and interests of its residents. He easily made contact with the people in the neighborhoods by visiting stores, bars, beauty parlors and churches, by informing and involving people on the streets [1 - 7], by distributing explanatory leaflets, and by inviting all who were interested to participate.

The news media were also most cooperative. The project received coverage on at least three televi-

on programs, and in approximately thirty newspaper articles. The dialogue with the community expanded when the actual work was started on the sites. At first, the presence of the artist and his helpers in what was previously unused and unoccupied space merely aroused curiosity. But soon that presence became an active force, and the spectator evolved into a participant by lending a hand or giving advice. This was probably the most rewarding part of the project.

#### Site Sculpture

In the past decade and a half, more and more gifted and adventurous artists have been drawn to the medium of outdoor environmental art, perhaps as a logical progression of first freeing themselves from the confines of a frame and, ultimately, from the limitations of the gallery or museum space. But the difference is not in scale alone: "this kind of sculpture does not just occupy the space defined by its own physical limits; it also affects one's experience of the space around it . . . the appearance and shape of the landscape are an essential part of the work itself" (Sollins and Sundell, pg. 31). The movement away from "establishment" exhibition spaces is also, undoubtedly, an outgrowth of some of the "anti-art" attitudes of the sixties. But whatever its evolution, outdoor environmental art is probably one of the most interesting developments of the seventies.

Site-related sculpture is both a recent phenomenon and an ancient preoccupation of man. Long before the beginning of recorded history, man created monumental works which were intimately related to the place of their making and to the space around them. But these are parallels rather than antecedents, for contemporary site-specific art resembles most strongly the art of the present.

Most of the recent environmental art has been created in rural surroundings and sometimes even in remote and inaccessible places. A much smaller number of works have been done in an urban context. We believe that the Cleveland *City Project* is the first coordinated effort undertaken that involves several artists, residents of the inner city community, students from universities and secondary schools, and an art gallery. As a result, it seemed appropriate to record the project in some detail. This was done by Joyce Deep who photo-documented all phases of the project, a crew from the Instructional Media Services of Cleveland State University who videotaped the work in progress, and the staff of The New Gallery who produced this catalog.

Marjorie Telsley



1, 2, 3 Wright, microphone in hand, talks to customers at Square Deal Supermarket (left), patrons at Smart Set Lounge (center), and passersby on East 55th Street (below, left).



4 Video crew from Cleveland State University's Instructional Media Services (right) records a discussion at Wine Tavern.



5 Royal Beauty Salon (78th and Euclid) after Jim Osher, second from right, and Marvin Wright showed a film on urban art.



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6

6-7 Wright explains City Project to St. Agnes parishioners at the rectory after Sunday Mass.



Community Coordinator Marvin Wright visits neighborhood stores, bars, beauty parlors and churches to explain CITY PROJECT to people who live or work in the vicinity of the projected site sculptures.

8 Wright discusses Project with Phoebe ("Tiny") Brown, superintendent of apartment building adjoining Crawford/Charley site.



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## CHARLES SIMONDS

### AT ERIE SQUARE

The project undertaken by Charles Simonds in Cleveland differed in several important respects from those of the other three artists. While Hamroff's "Footbridge" and Stackhouse's "Ark" were single sculptures, Simonds' "Environment" comprised a variety of discrete elements, some of which were entirely utilitarian. Moreover, Stackhouse's and Hamroff's works were highly visible to the commuter traffic; Simonds, in contrast, elected to site his work far enough from the streets to retain an intimate relationship with the resident community. More importantly, while the other artists came to the sites with completed designs of the pieces they were to create, Simonds' project envisaged from the outset the participation of the community in the design and the decision-making process.

Of the four artists chosen for the City Project, Charles Simonds was perhaps the most attuned to life in the inner city. Since 1970 he has spent much of his time on the streets of New York's Lower East Side, creating intentionally ephemeral art objects, primarily for the benefit of black and Puerto Rican youngsters. His creations, diminutive in scale, were envisaged as dwelling places for an imaginary migrant civilization of "Little People." They looked like archaeological sites seen through the wrong end of a spyglass. While he worked Simonds remained in constant dialogue with the passerby. In addition he was always surrounded by children "who would first stare in silence, then would begin to ask questions about what he was doing and in most instances would end up by 'helping' him." "The people on the street never hassled me," he says. "I was taken as someone who had nothing anyone might want to steal, and was giving something . . . There wasn't even a threat of Art with a capital 'A.'" (New Yorker magazine, 22 November 1975.) Not all of Simonds' ephemeral environments were built in the streets. Many were made in the studio and exhibited in major museums; he has also created a number of large outdoor environmental sculptures in places like Artpark in Lewiston, New York. Simonds' involvement in the community and its children led in the summer of 1975 to the creation of a park-playlot-sculpture on East 2nd Street in New York. This project was made possible through the cooperation of several neighborhood organizations.



47 Charles Simonds' site at 7801 Euclid, viewed from Chester Avenue. Erie Square apartments are on the right.



48 Aerial view of Simonds' site (circled) and Stackhouse's site (squares).

- 1 & 2 Erie Square apartments
- 3 Abandoned gas station
- 4 A party hall
- 5 Old ten story business/apartment building
- 6 St. Agnes parish house
- 7 Belttower, casting a long shadow
- 8 Houses on East 81st Street
- 9 Cleveland Playhouse
- 10 "Art Lot on 82nd Street"

Photo: Aerial Surveys Inc., 1977  
Scale: 1" approx. 550 ft.

The site that Simonds selected for his City Project is part of a large empty lot on the north side of Euclid Avenue between East 75th and East 78th Street. It is only a block west of St. Agnes. The lot is 250 feet at its narrowest point and runs the entire length from Euclid to Chester, a distance of about one thousand feet. Except for an annual carnival which pitches its gear here, creates a lot of noise and litter, takes the people's money and moves on, the lot is not used for anything in particular (47).

Abutting the lot on the west, and separated from it by a chain link fence, is Erie Square, an award-winning, renovated apartment complex. Its two rectangular buildings run north and south and are set well back from both avenues. Other features of the site and its surrounding structures can be seen in the aerial photo (48). When standing in the middle of the vacant lot one almost has the feeling of being in the country: trees, bushes, birds, and even an occasional squirrel are in evidence. The traffic seems far away. There is a footpath running from Chester to Euclid which is infrequently used. It was this middle section, overlooked by the apartment windows, that Simonds chose for his work.

Neither the physical aspects of the site nor the immediate adjacent community is typical of the inner city. A middle class family structure predominates at Erie Square, with mother, father and children living together as an integral unit. Almost everyone is employed, in school or retired. This stable, upwardly mobile residential group differs considerably from the communities surrounding the other three City Project locations.



48 Simonds, Alaburda and Aishah Garret, right, fill bags.



50 A day's "mess" of sandbags ready to be arranged.



51 Simonds directs a group of children from the Erie Square apartments.

When Charles Simonds and Jim Osher first visited the site they had the good fortune of running into Nathan, an elderly black man who had formerly been superintendent of one of the Erie Square buildings and was well-liked by the tenants. A few days earlier, Nathan had seen a group of Osher's Cleveland State University students cleaning up a lot on 82nd Street in preparation for a site-sculpture of their own (pg. 34). In talking to the students, Nathan first learned about the City Project. He liked the idea and offered to introduce Simonds to those tenants in the building he felt would be most interested and helpful.

Simonds had come to Cleveland with the general idea of creating a "growing sculpture" — not unlike the one he had done at Artpark, New York, [54]. Beyond this general concept his plans were flexible, so that he might involve the resident community in the creative process.

At Charles Simonds' suggestion a meeting of tenants to discuss the project was promptly organized by Aishah Garret, an energetic young woman who lived in the building. The community room which had not been used in some time was opened; fifteen interested adults — and an even greater number of children — showed up. While the children had to be excluded from the planning session, they did become active participants in the execution of



52 Stoney holds bag while Simone fills it. Terry waits his turn.



53 Simonds explains next phase to Erie Square tenants Shirley Gilmore and friend.



56 Simonds settles a "jurisdictional dispute"

56 Kim Ababunda and Terry Gilmore install water line.

57 Kim Oringates cone-shaped "growing sculpture." Permission to connect to the Erie Square water supply was negotiated by Marjorie Tatalay. The New Gallery also arranged for a street light on the site.

the project. At the meeting Simonds explained his plan to make a growing sculpture garden by filling burlap bags with soil, arranging the bags in simple structural forms, and inserting seeds into the bags through small punched holes. The seeds would sprout, he explained, and produce vegetation which would become an integral part of the sculpture. Simonds asked for suggestions for other kinds of structures to be built on the site and for volunteers to clear the area of trash.

In response, at least 25 children and some older residents of Erie Square, as well as students from Osher's Urban Art class, appeared the following evening for the clean-up operation. Even Lloyd Hamrol and Robert Stackhouse came to assist. In several hours of intense effort the group gathered the trash and debris which the city later cleared away.

By the second meeting, a few days later, some topsoil, donated through the efforts of Marjorie Tatalay by two landscape contractors (Santamary and Mann), had been delivered and bags were being filled. At this follow-up meeting the group agreed on the actual components and layout of the project. Visually dominating the site would be a large cone-shaped "growing sculpture"; the area surrounding it would contain flower beds, two children's play area, a vegetable garden and a barbecue pit. The two parallel flower beds enclosed by soil-filled bags would be rectangular to mirror the shape

54 Vegetation sprouts from sanded bags at Arpark, N.Y.



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57





58-59 Construction of the barbecue area attracted the participation of several adult tenants.



60 Completed barbecue area.



of the adjacent apartment buildings, while the children's play areas were to be circular. The vegetable garden was to be fenced in to keep out vandals and stray dogs.

Quickly, a work schedule became established. Simonds, with the help of a few Cleveland State University students, primarily Kim Alabanda, Esther Akiba, and Joyce Deep, and, occasionally, an adult tenant who did not hold a daytime job, would begin the day by getting the materials together and filling some bags. Then, around three every day, an influx of neighborhood children, ranging in age from four to fourteen, would scale Erie Square's fence anxious to help. Their main job — and one for which they practically fought — was shoveling soil into the bags. Sometimes it would take two little children working together to handle the shovel, but they figured out how to do that too! When the cone-shaped "growing sculpture" was completed, the older children in the group undertook the responsibility of protecting its newly planted seeds by keeping the younger ones from climbing on it. One of the square "flower beds" was built almost entirely by James and Shirley Gilmore whose apartment windows overlooked the site. The clearing and planting of the vegetable garden [58 to 70], and the building of the barbecue grill, [58 to 60] attracted the assistance of other adult tenants. In less than three weeks, the entire job was completed.

Many elements were responsible for the success of the project at Erie Square. Simonds' concern for people, his charisma, his unending energy and his artistic sensibility were invaluable assets. Equally important, Simonds' talents found fertile ground for expression in the aware and interested Erie Square community with which he worked. Other



61

Tenants, children, student volunteers and project organizers celebrate completion of Simons' site-sculpture with a barbecue.



62-63 Erie Square children enjoying the barbecue.



64 Joyce Deep with friends (Chanel and Jeyjay).



63



65 Cousins Cappy and Terry.

66 Kim Alaborda with friends (Simons, Kiki and Michaela, right).



67 Erie Square tenants Alex Tillye, Aisha Garrett, Charlie Gaddis and Jesse Gilmore, right, the most active workers on the Simons project, celebrate its completion.



68 James Gilmore and his son, Terry, clear the land for the vegetable garden.



69 Gilmore and Simonds prepare the ground.

70 Esther Akiba and Angie Gilmore look for first sign of growth in the vegetable garden.



Important factors were the dedication of the students and the released, but constructively directed energies of the children. Many of the residents were impressed by the fact that a professional artist had come from New York to create a work in their "back yard."

Simonds, himself, liked to keep a low profile. He was not too anxious for the media to cover the project and insisted, when photographed, on being surrounded by his co-workers. In conversation he would play down the artistic component of his project. He liked the almost secluded location of the site and had no interest in producing "a piece of decoration for the passing automobile traffic." He wanted to "delineate a piece of land so that in some part it will welcome other people as visitors, but at the same time control their impact on it."

When the project was completed a barbecue was held on the site, [67 to 67]. Simonds was leaving for Buffalo the next day to help install a one man show of his work at the Albright Knox Gallery, and several tenants talked of hiring a bus so that everyone on the project might go to the opening. While this ambitious idea never did get beyond the talking stage, it was an indication of the community's involvement in and enthusiasm for Simonds' project.

A not-so-coincidental by-product of Charles Simonds' presence was the formation of a Tenants' Council at Erie Square. The germ of the idea began at the first meeting Simonds held in the community room. Here, for the first time, a substantial number of tenants had gathered for a common cause. After discussion of the City Project had been completed, the talk naturally shifted to other issues: tenant safety, building services, management response, etc. The tenants began to realize the value of discussing, as a unit, their common needs and wants. □



71 Charles Simonds' site sculpture seen from the top of Eric Square apartments. The site work is completed except for the fencing in of the vegetable garden, top right.