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Trust the Process?

Chicago's INVEST South/West yields early initial projects, but not without communication breakdowns along the way

By Anjulle Rao • May 11, 2022 • Development, Midwest, News, Urbanism



Rendering depicting Evergreen Imagine, an INVEST South/West-winning redevelopment proposal for the 79th Street corridor in Chicago's Auburn Gresham neighborhood. (Courtesy Ross Barney Architects)

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It's generally understood among Chicago residents that the city looks the way it does because of institutionalized racism, which built, and unbuilt, much of the southern and western areas of the city. Less clear to most is how one might go about repairing the results of that catastrophe, as singular new developments won't heal and transform neighborhoods traumatized by decades of disinvestment and demolition. When Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who ran on an equity platform, and her commissioner of the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) Maurice Cox announced their INVEST South/West (ISW) initiative back in 2019, it was largely regarded as one step toward the type of repair required to bring businesses back into these neighborhoods and stimulate new growth in areas that need it the most.



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The City of Chicago calls ISW a "global model for urban revitalization." According to a press release from November 2021, there has been approximately \$1.4 billion in investments so far, including \$750 million in city funds, \$575 million in corporate and philanthropic commitments, and \$300 million in planned mixed-use projects. Accounting for the last figure is a series of RFPs issued by the city over the past two years to developers and architects for the redevelopment of sites along commercial corridors across ten areas on the city's South and West sides. These corridors once functioned as small downtowns for Black and Brown neighborhoods; as populations waned and subsequent "blight" removal programs demolished businesses and homes, these

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high-level programmatic decisions and zoning, these areas were left in economic and physical ruin.

ISW seeks to repair these corridors and court new private development, but it has not yet proved to be a panacea. Instead, it has underscored the complexity that long-running disinvestment has lodged in decision-making processes. It's clear that these processes ought to build trust and transparency, not just measurable outcomes.



The Laramie State Bank building in Chicago's Austin neighborhood. (Eric Allix Rogers)

RFPs for ISW sites are issued in phases. In 2020, the first three sites for consideration were located in the neighborhoods of Austin, Auburn Gresham, and Englewood. In 2021, the city announced that it had awarded seven projects through similar RFPs, and a project in North Lawndale was awarded in January 2022. The process is relatively consistent for each location: It begins with a kickoff celebration in each neighborhood; architects and developers have three months to prepare a proposal; all proposals are presented at community meetings, where residents have an opportunity to speak and ask questions; feedback and "scoring" are provided through electronic surveys and collected from residents; and, finally, the city evaluates each proposal, taking into account survey feedback, and selects a winning proposal.

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Proposals for Austin and Auburn Gresham were due by November 24, 2020, followed by community presentations in January 2021 and winner announcements that March. In Austin, architecture firms Latent Design and Valerio Dewalt Train Associates with Oak Park Regional Housing Center and Heartland Alliance won the bid with a proposal called Austin United Alliance, which will rehabilitate the historic Laramie State Bank building into a blues museum, business incubator, cafe, and housing. It will serve as a gateway development for the Chicago Avenue commercial corridor. In Auburn Gresham, a proposal called Evergreen Imagine from Nia Architects and Ross Barney Architects with Evergreen Real Estate Group and Imagine Group aims to bring dense, equitable transit-oriented development rental units to a vacant site along the 79th Street corridor.

After these winning proposals were announced, both were met with protests lodged by members of the respective communities. As reported previously by local outlet *Austin Weekly News*, some Austin residents were outraged that the winning proposal included Oak Park Regional Housing Center, a suburban nonprofit that will manage the housing units on the Laramie Bank site. The city's survey results were meager: DPD asked residents to evaluate all seven RFP proposals, but the department collected only 27 responses—27 out of 100 roundtable participants and 96,000 Austin residents.

In a February 2021 roundtable meeting prior to the award announcements, Darnell Shields, executive director of the prominent neighborhood nonprofit Austin Coming Together, said that "because it's an RFP process, there are certain constraints ... that create some barriers around the city's intentions on having an authentic requirement around community engagement. How much input can we actually have on a train moving at a pace that we didn't set? There weren't a whole lot of opportunities for these applicants to thoroughly engage the community." Shields went on to tell *Block Club Chicago* reporter Pascal Sabino that residents were "invited to the table to help make the decision, but not to develop the process."



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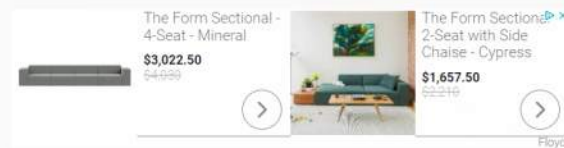
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Auburn Gresham, which is part of Chicago's Bungalow Belt, has prioritized homeownership as part of its own 2016 quality-of-life plan, developed by the Greater Auburn Gresham Community Development Corporation. Many residents were vocal about their objections to the planned multifamily residential proposal discussed in the various roundtable meetings hosted on Zoom by DPD and shared via YouTube. Instead, residents expressed a desire for commercial development.

Carol Ross Barney, principal and founder of Ross Barney Architects, saw the protests in Auburn Gresham not as a subset of rabble-rousers, but as a product of the community engagement process: "When we won ISW, our proposal was based on the process that they had [previously] done. And the very first meeting, all we had was pushback; they didn't want housing, they didn't want that type of housing," she told AN. "Nobody would talk to anybody." At one meeting held on Zoom on June 24, 2021, Auburn Gresham residents and Cox had tense exchanges, wherein Cox implied that developer interest in the Auburn Gresham site was low and that the city "always has the option to do nothing."

Ross Barney's team put together a new engagement process that combined open houses for speaking with the design team with more structured activities and drawing sessions, both in-person and via Zoom. Eight extra meetings were held during the summer in 2021, resulting in a project that redistributes development between two adjacent sites, adds park space, and includes a commercial space. The process added both time and costs—particularly due to adding another property—to the final design. In a November 2021 Committee on Design presentation, David Block of Evergreen Real Estate Group said that his "gut says that it's still the right way to develop [neighborhoods like Auburn Gresham], but it's a hugely economically inefficient way to do it." Barney noted that by the end of her team's engagement process, the "vibe was different"; it had become more supportive of the project. This was due in part to the fact that residents were more willing to give her team a chance, simply put, because they weren't representing the city. "A program like this is really radical for our city, but these are really disinvested communities, Ross Barney said. "They don't trust the city."



What Ross Barney et al. did right was to take the time to build trust, making space for necessary discomfort that she said can yield compromise, not winners and losers. "What we're missing in Congress is what we're now trying to grow in these communities: the idea that you can compromise, and you can talk about resources and the allocation of resources, and there doesn't have to be a lot of losers," she said. Separately, Ross said, "Chicago's vitality depends on the strength of all its neighborhoods," adding that she's "happy to be associated with this program and [looks] forward completing well-designed homes for the Auburn Gresham community."

This is the "speed of trust" that many designers ought to employ when working with long-neglected communities, a pace at which community members not only feel some degree of ownership over the outcomes, but over the process itself. After mayoral predecessors Richard M. Daley and Rahm Emanuel, whose downtown development blitzes largely ignored South and West Side communities, Lightfoot framed ISW's development opportunities through an equity lens. The Austin proposal, like all selected ISW proposals, will continue to undergo extensive review, including public meetings. But is this typical of how many design competitions establish community agency over their own neighborhood's future?

After decades of disinvestment instilled a sense of distrust, these neighborhoods don't just need new developments—they need the city to lead reparative processes. Following philosopher Olúfemi Táíwò's work on spatial reparations, this means that agencies shouldn't only redress past harms and negligence with new buildings but should build justice into the built environment itself. This can be accomplished by providing communities with greater control over the development process for these sites and allowing communities to decide the extent of engagement required.

There is so much hope here. ISW stands to create useful, beneficial buildings in disinvested places; proposals such as Ross Barney's include thoughtful programs that will drive future private investment. The program's problems are not an indictment of the projects themselves

program's problems are not an indictment of the project itself, but of the ways in which city planners respond to the contexts in which they operate. Trust isn't built by outcomes alone, but through how we achieve those outcomes—through collaborative processes that make space for friction and, eventually, cohesion.

Anjolie Rao is a Chicago-based critic and journalist covering the built environment.



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