The Paradox of Life Affirming Death Traps

Brian Chippendale recalls what he learned from years of co-running and living in a DIY space.

December 15, 2016 - Brian Chippendale is a musician and visual artist based in Providence, Rhode Island. He is the drummer and vocalist for the noise rock duo, Lightning Bolt.

As told to Brian Chippendale, 2903 words.

In Providence, Rhode Island, artists, musicians, and scene characters live and work in old red brick mills that once churned out textiles and jewelry. I've spent over 20 years in these castles of the industrial age. These days most people look at these historic industrial buildings as gorgeous wood floors, warm brick walls, tall light-filled windows, and high airy ceilings; all polished up for luxury. My gang never really cared about any of that, we were there for the thickness of the walls and the isolation.

Far from the neighborhoods behind brick two feet thick, we could be anyone and do anything we wanted. Fort Thunder was my first zone, starting in 1995. By 2002 we were evicted by fire marshals and the building was razed for a shopping center. We had over 100 shows during the six years of the Fort's lifespan, not a huge amount compared to other art spaces, but it was plenty. We didn't pay the rent with parties; we paid the rent by cramming in roommates. Paying the rent using money the shows generated never really dawned on us since we made the shows super affordable, keeping only the change in the bottom of the donation bin. We had the Fugazi mentality: keep things cheap and do it for the people.

Our lease-free month-to-month 7,000 square foot space had a large cavernous side where the shows happened and bigger projects could be worked on, plus a music practice space, silkscreening area, kitchen, and a bike repair zone. The smaller side contained the library and living quarters where most of the six to twelve roommates built their rooms. The rooms were crafted from whatever we and the cats dragged in; found wood (mostly pallets), paper, cloth, cardboard, plastic. Anything that was cheap or free. If there is one thing that every broke warehouse dweller knows it's that wood pallets are the cheapest wood you'll find; available and plentiful.

My room was a large, sealed, mountain-looking thing made from drywall, plywood, and wood pallets stuffed with old clothes for insulation and sealed with wheat pasted paper to keep the drafts out. Beneath the lofted area of the room was a hallway crammed full of stuffed animals, paper, clothing, toys, and all sorts of other debris attached to every surface with a variety of hand-wired lamps weaving through it. It was truly a hungry fire's dream shanty.

Brian Chippendale (up top) and Mat Brinkman (standing) under Chippendale's loft in Fort Thunder circa 2000. Photo by Adam Wallacavage.

The aesthetic of these rooms came from two places; the slim economic situation shared by most everyone involved and a love of expressive architecture—an urge to make your room an extension of yourself. Making art or music your career or life's mission is a slow build kind of journey. In order to do it seriously, you need time and space. Money is fundamental, but it has to be prioritized to a lesser degree than finding the time to experiment in your field. Not unlike scientists, artists and musicians find new ground through experimentation and experimentation tends to not pay a whole lot. But it's a necessity. It's no coincidence that the value of both science and the arts is endlessly questioned by a certain subset of people. They are both fields with no limits and that limitless nature is what some folks find terrifying.

Over the course of our six years in Fort Thunder, we never stopped decorating. Our space became a dumping ground for our trash-picking friends. Everything that came in the door was stapled to the walls and ceiling or organized in some way. It wasn't just a space, it was a living organism. It came to be the only art that made sense to me. Art shows in galleries seemed frail compared to this hidden but permanent world of radical juxtapositions we were building. Music shows in formal clubs seemed like funerals for rigid space.

Our warehouse was a blank box when we walked in; devoid of domestic architecture, waiting for definition. As the place slowly filled with every forgotten thing under the sun, we would move the debris piles and craft new landscapes for each event. The house would come together cooking food and cleaning, getting ready for a night of good-natured chaos. Walls would get smashed by party goers and the next day they would be built back up from old pieces into new forms. Secret rooms were built and fortified to hide your stuff (and yourself) from visitors. Each morning you would wake to something new, something changed. A new drawing, a new print, a new scrawl on a wall, a new room, a new item from some forgotten corner of town, a new weirdo sitting in a new old chair in the kitchen eating your hard won food.

Every show in the house was advertised through a silkscreened poster made by one of the roommates, and as the years went by the prints became more cryptic and abstract—the print itself not a literal communication but a beacon pasted around town, a signal that some sort of strange event was coming. If you knew of our place you could decipher the code; you maybe didn't know what was happening but you knew where it was happening. Some people called the kids that lived in the mills the Peter Pan Boys (we were mostly boys at that point), boys that would never grow up, clinging to some fantasy life in a fantasy land. But when the world outside is scary, boring, ugly, and hateful, what do you do? You either drown in it or you drown it out.

I think everyone involved in booking shows at this deep underground level of culture—where money isn't really being generated for the venue or the booker—at some point starts to wonder why they are doing it. Why book performers and bring people into your private space and disrupt your day to day rituals and your productivity? An urgency to enhance the community? To bring people together? A thirst for some revelation found only in communal experience? Perhaps people who do it are paying a karmic debt for some show they went to as a kid that changed their life. Prior to Fort Thunder, we had been to a couple loft parties in downtown Providence buildings, run by older Rhode Island School of Design kids. Bands played, people danced, and our suburban minds were blown.

A key component in these house shows or mill shows is the trust the host puts in the audience by opening the door to their home. When you enter a space that is lived in you feel a bond with the place and the person. That quickly imbues the show with a sense of higher meaning—that by entering a person's house you have joined their family. I've been to boring shows in intensely loved spaces and still been wholly satisfied. Homes have a warmth that many venues do not, a vibe not of commercialism but of communal sharing. Performers in casual spaces tend to intermix with the audience and melt down the artificial wall between the artist and the viewer. These places can give a platform for the most out there of performers, performers whose expression cannot be commodified in its current state.

It's communities like these that grow the roots that allow a city to form its own artistic identity. There is the feeling of freedom, the feeling that Big Brother's eyes aren't able to penetrate the walls or see those within, to judge who you are or how you are. (Not that there is a tremendous amount to judge.) Most gatherings in unmonitored spaces are generally just a lot of people dancing. Dancing and laughing. Building friendships and building character.

Fort Thunder was an unmonitored space, but it was not devoid of safety. We had a working sprinkler system. You'll be hard pressed to find a warehouse in Providence that does not. We had fire extinguishers stashed throughout. We had a fire escape and a huge push bar front door that opened out into a wide staircase to the ground level, both exits accessible from the concert zone. We were on the second floor and there were multiple windows that could all be opened. It would have hurt like hell to jump, but you could have done it. We were conscious of hazards and the escapes on some basic level.

Still, Providence is different than the Fruitvale district of Oakland. Our huge front door had a broken lock for months and only a few strangers wandered in in the middle of the night. We only had one or two thefts during our run and even then it was nothing of much value. In Oakland, people grate and board up their windows out of necessity to keep the steady flow of unwanted visitors out of their space, not with the intention to trap people inside. Perhaps the inability to just open a window suggests that the dire economic issues outside of the Ghost Ship played a larger role in the fire's narrative than the financial situation of the people inside.

Landlords play a role in these spaces as well. I don't think our landlord at Fort Thunder was too concerned with our safety. He was kind of an asshole—he showed up to collect the rent and never showed up to do anything else. Pipes froze and burst and it was up to us to fix them. In that way, it was perfect. We felt like we owned it. The only time he got furious with us was when a local paper wrote about the space. "You kids are idiots" he said, in no way referring to the cardboard labyrinth we had built in his building. "Keep it out of the papers." The negligence of the landlord is part of the deal, you ask them for nothing and they close their eyes to whatever you might want to do. An absentee landlord means an absentee system of rules and standards. Aside from his absence, the only other important role he played is that he kept the fire inspectors away.

It has been said that fire inspectors had not gained access to the Ghost Ship building in a long time. In the '90s—in a notoriously corrupt Providence—the feeling about fire marshals was that if your landlord was greasing the wheels then they never looked very hard at your space. One afternoon an inspector came through with our landlord; we had been warned, doors had been locked, beds stashed away, and all of us hidden. I was 12 feet up in my three-foot-high lofted sleeping space listening as they walked underneath through the tunnel covered in flammable detritus and sketchy electrical work. The fire marshal was talking about the sprinkler system, how it was bad that we had built our lofts below the sprinkler heads without putting another sprinkler head below the loft and how the sprinklers weren't meant to save lives just property.

Still, we somehow passed the inspection and they never returned until late 2001 when the property was slated to be developed into a grocery store. When they came this final time the space was the same as it had been on their previous visit but suddenly they were incredibly detail oriented. I was painting with ink at a desk and I got chastised for not having an eyewash station.

A few years later in 2004, in my next studio, I was evicted by fire marshals from a small room with two exits to the street on the first floor of a cement building. I couldn't have lit that building on fire if I tried. We had three days to get out and it was 13 degrees that frozen week of January. I couldn't fathom how the 60 people who got evicted that week would fair better homeless in the heart of New England winter than in a heated building with some violations that could have been worked toward bettering. That particular landlord had a bad relationship with the city. The thought that always popped up when I was lectured by fire marshals about the hazardous nature of my space was that these spaces felt so much safer than all the cramped old apartments and houses I had lived in over the years—dangerous old attic or basement apartments with ancient knob and tube electricity and skinny dark staircases.

Once you get the idea in your head that fire inspectors are just another political tool it's hard to trust their motives. But I do recall one inspector saying to me during an inspection, "You may think this is all cool but we're the ones who have to pull the bodies out after a fire."

I didn't take him seriously, but those are powerful words here today.

There's no fairness to a tragedy, or that one night in Oakland something caught fire and just kept burning. There are hundreds of not-up-to-code spaces with artists all across the world that operate day to day with some danger but thrive and survive. The fourth deadliest fire in U.S. history happened here in Rhode Island, at the Station nightclub in 2003. The band Great White lit off fireworks and the sound dampening foam caught fire. 100 people died. 230 people were injured. This was an insane and devastating tragedy in a legitimate and inspected club.

After that fire, I memorized the exits in every space we played for years to come, but the urgency fades with time. Everyone should strive toward safety, but there is always a risk. I could have been wiser in each of the three mills I have occupied over the last 20 years. I've been lucky. We were lucky. Does a fire like the Ghost Ship mark the end of the chaos aesthetic? Will handcrafted wooden doors to your cobbled together room be traded in for code-compliant push doors on a drywall box? Will overcrowded and overheated parties step aside for clicker counters at the door and a firm "sorry the room is full" from the deeply responsible 20 year-old guarding the entrance? Honestly, I doubt it.

To this day, when I walk into my studio a weight lifts off me. I feel liberated and productive. Every artist is a small factory of culture. America exports massive amounts of entertainment and culture. If art and music scenes can't be viewed as simply spiritual boons to society, they should be viewed as a completely valid and valuable asset in an economic sense. By the end of the '90s, during Fort Thunder's heyday, there were five different spaces for artists in our building and there were one or two additional art spaces in the building behind us. There was a big space across the side street full of young creative people and there was a building facing us packed with more artists and musicians.

RISD and Brown students were staying in Providence instead of moving to NYC after leaving school because the town was happening. It felt like a revolution. By 2003 it was all cleared out and the area devolved into a Staples that went out of business, a Stop-and-Shop grocery store that went out of business, a few small shops like Radio Shack, and several parking lots. So much for revolution. So much for the seed of a movement that could have grown and put Providence on the map as an arts mecca.

I don't know if now is a good time to talk about artist enclaves in industrial buildings. A better time would have been on December 1st. Or a year ago. Ten years ago. There is never a shortage of tragedy and there is never a shortage of the politicization of tragedy. I'll attempt to depoliticize it right here. Whether you perished in the Gatlinburg fire in the red state of Tennessee or The Ghost Ship in the blue state of California, you are gone all the same. People are suffering. You can lay blame but don't desecrate the dead. Folks on polar opposite sides of the cultural spectrum can't even fathom how the other side would live where or as they do.

Your own loving parents may have no clue as to why you crawl into a grimy warehouse to lay down on a mattress dragged in from the street to stare up at the roof of your indoor cabin built from scavenged wood, but you do it to be free. I think now in this particular moment in history the idea that there is "cultural common ground" among people can be laid to rest.

This Oakland news is fresh, this tragedy is raw. It's unbelievable. Some people lost a good portion of their friend network in one hellish night, and those friends that died lost everything. Entire futures snuffed out in an instant. I'm so sorry this happened. I'm so grateful that so many people I know (and I) have been incredibly lucky. Many many people have passed through the mills that these artist communities have inhabited, and many many people have been enriched by the time they spent there.

– By Brian Chippendale

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Vocation
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Fact

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