

A full-page photograph serves as the background. It depicts a person with long hair, wearing a dark jacket, walking away from the camera on a set of railroad tracks. The tracks are made of metal rails on a bed of gravel and lead towards a row of houses in the distance. To the left of the tracks are bare trees. To the right, there are modern residential buildings, including a multi-story one with a prominent staircase. The sky is bright blue with large, white, fluffy clouds. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

TRAILBLAZER

How an SAIC faculty member is modeling new pathways for artists

by Jeremy Ohmes



Frances Whitehead on The 606. Photos: Jerzy Rose (BFA 2008)

An elevated path stretches out like a forgotten scar on the face of Chicago's Northwest side. Dead-end railroad tracks run the length of the path—just short of three miles. A few freight cars, covered in graffiti and filled with gravel, leave the impression of commerce and use. The uprooted trees, broken bottles, and splintered railroad ties suggest otherwise.

This is the future site of The 606. Named for the first three digits of Chicago's zip code, The 606 will be a multiuse recreational trail and park system adapted from an elevated rail line, which runs east to west through four Chicago neighborhoods. Scheduled to open in the fall of 2014, The 606 will offer walking and biking paths, picnic areas, event plazas, performance spaces, integrated artworks, varied topography, and diverse native and ornamental plantings. The public greenway is being branded as "Chicago's next great park" and the requisite army of designers, landscape architects, engineers, community stakeholders, city officials, and conservation agents are doing their best to live up to that claim.

For SAIC Professor Frances Whitehead, Lead Artist on The 606 Design Team, the making of The 606 holds other possibilities for the future of art practice. Working with, between, and among various parties and deploying an aesthetic that includes cultural expression, innovation, participation, and sustainability, Whitehead is bringing together art, design, science, and civic engagement for the public good. As a member of the Design Team, Whitehead is working to reimagine the abandoned rail line and how an urban trail can inspire, engage, and educate its surrounding citizens.

"We inherit a lot that is degraded and needs work. How do we revalue it, reuse it, and learn from it?"

Pacing along the tracks, Whitehead gestures, points, and impassions on the environmental and ecological issues rooted in the path. She talks about soil conditions, unused rail lines, and post-industrial landscapes through the lens of industrial and cultural heritage. She says, "We only think of cultural heritage as the good stuff, but we also inherit a lot that is degraded, disturbed, and needs work. How do we revalue it, reuse it, and learn from it?" Whitehead is in a rare position to actualize the answers to those questions through a major public project, with support from local and national agencies.

The 606 is not the first time Whitehead has engaged a city to address cultural, social, or environmental challenges. In fact, over the last decade, she has made a habit of nudging her way into nontraditional orbits—moving beyond galleries and museums into the civic arenas where artists rarely roam.

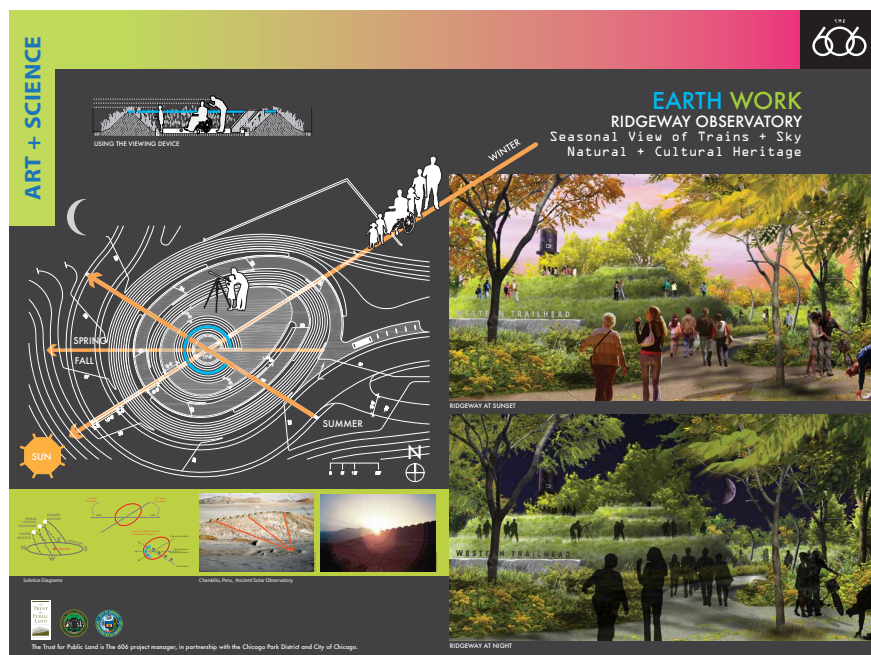
During her 30-year career, Whitehead gradually morphed her fine art practice into a deeper engagement in public practice. Nature, science, and sustainability always informed her work as she exhibited plant-based sculptures and works in galleries and public sites. But around 2000, with concerns of global warming circling the public's mind, Whitehead became politicized around climate change and environmental crises. She studied sustainability theory and design futures, investigating how artists can make meaningful contributions to the challenges ahead. She established SAIC's Knowledge Lab, a collaborative environment where students and faculty identify important subjects—such as energy, waste, or urban agriculture—and formulate transdisciplinary projects to produce new knowledge.

In 2005 she found her way into the center of Cleveland, Ohio's plans to reclaim and revitalize the Steelyard Commons area in the Cuyahoga River Valley. Joined by designer and fellow SAIC faculty member Lisa Norton, Whitehead made a case that artists should be part of the city's formal planning process in order to integrate art and sustainability concepts. Norton says that Whitehead saw the project as a successful example of the valuable role that artists can play in public planning and speculative city futures. She notes, "From a firsthand, in-depth understanding of how artists are situated within systems, Frances is intentionally seeking to model new ways of being an artist."

This idea that artists can provide new perspectives on civic endeavors led Whitehead to develop the Embedded Artist Project—a partnership between SAIC and the City of Chicago to creatively address civic challenges by embedding practicing artists in city departments. "I asked, what is my knowledge base, and where is the agency to affect change?" explains Whitehead. "So I wandered into City Hall...and offered my services, my cultural literacy". What I found was that the city was very excited about new ideas and new thinking." She collaborated with Chicago's Department of Planning and Department of Environment on a phytoremediation project to clean up abandoned gas stations also known as "brownfields" around the city. Working with soil scientists, botanists, and community members, *The Slow Clean-up* project team has identified at least 12 new ornamental plant remediator species that will expand the aesthetic potential of clean-up sites, enhancing communities in the interim.

Now as lead artist for The 606, Whitehead is bringing the methods, mindsets, and strategies of a contemporary artist to the process of shaping the future city.

Observatory, Frances Whitehead, Collins Engineers, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, in collaboration with Adler Planetarium, Chicago, 2013. Courtesy of The Trust for Public Land, City of Chicago, and Chicago Park District



For most of the 20th century the trail was a commercial route for the Canadian Pacific-owned Soo Line Railroad—an artery to bring goods and materials into Chicago and to distribute local products like Schwinn bicycles, Lincoln Logs, and Hammond organs to the world. By 2001 freight on the route had come to a standstill, and the rail line fell into disrepair. Subsequently, the elevated path—out of sight but forever hovering—became a refuge for trespassers of all stripes: vagrants, foragers, urban explorers, love-struck teenagers, curious passersby, joggers, walkers, and trail runners.

Locals named the path "The Bloomingdale Trail" or "The Bloomingdale" due to its trajectory along Bloomingdale Avenue, and rumors swirled about the former rail line being transformed into a linear park. In 2003 the grassroots nonprofit Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail (FBT) formed to advocate for this transformation. And in 2004, working with FBT and other community members, the City of Chicago, Chicago Park District, and the Chicago Department of Transportation developed an open-space plan to address the lack of public parks and recreational opportunities on the city's Northwest Side. An official, City Council-approved "Bloomingdale Trail" was featured in the plan.

Over the next nine years, public meetings were held, community members were heard, plans and blueprints were proposed, land was bought, funds were raised, and agencies were assigned roles to help move the trail from concept to reality. Currently, the City of Chicago's Department of Housing and Economic Development oversees the overall planning, while the Chicago Department of Transportation is shepherding the engineering, design, and construction of the trail. The Chicago Park District will own and manage the park once it is completed.

Additionally, in a unique arrangement with the City of Chicago, national land conservation group, The Trust for Public Land (TPL), is leading the project management of the greenway. TPL selected an interdisciplinary design team of civil and structural engineers, landscape architects, and Whitehead as the Lead Artist. Beth White, Chicago Area Office Director of TPL, says that Whitehead inherited the charge to transform The 606 into "a living work of art." "She took that objective and made it operational," explains White. "In one of our first meetings Frances said, 'You have to make it *living*, make it *work*, and make it *artful*.'"

Walking the length of The 606 on a crisp, blue day, Whitehead offers some visual guidance on how she has tackled that challenge. She worked with Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events to create and integrate opportunities for other artists and the arts into the trail. This includes a series of invitational commissions, open calls for temporary and revolving works, installations, performances, and participatory pieces. There will be a commissioned piece that will visualize live data sets, as well as rotating galleries of interpretive and site-specific works—all reflecting the diversity of the community, the history of the trail, and the possibilities for its future. There will also be programming and partnerships that will connect citizens, schools, visitors, and local institutions to the trail.

Working closely and collaboratively with the Design Team and other specialty designers and scientists, Whitehead proposed and developed three major works for The 606, one at each trailhead and a linear work running the full length of the trail. Claiming a seamless and integrative aesthetic, she calls these “embedded” artworks, creating creative sites that hybridize art and design, art and science, and art and recreation in new ways.

At the western trailhead Whitehead draws a circle in the air. She and the design team collaborated with the Adler Planetarium to create a spiraling earthwork that will serve as a seasonal observatory. Inspired by ancient astronomy-based structures such as Thirteen Towers in Chankillo, Peru, the Ridgeway Observatory will be driven by solar alignments and the longitude of Chicago. The circular mound—constructed out of reused soil and rubble—will provide views of sunsets and stars, re-grounding audiences in the geographic reality along an ancient timeline.

For the eastern trailhead Whitehead worked with design firm Spohn Ranch to create a multigenerational, interactive skate park and event plaza. Conscious of the high-carbon footprint of cement-based skate parks, she is maximizing the site's function and performativity by making it “radically multifunctional.” The park—built with the requisite rails, verts, and manual pads—doubles as a performance venue complete with stages, acoustics, sound barriers, and what she calls a “smart bean”—an interactive sculptural object that pops open to program the sound system and lighting displays. “It's a plaza-style skate park that can host farmers' markets in the morning and music at night,” she hollers over the din of the nearby Kennedy Expressway. “My vision is kids skating on one side while Mom is listening to Yo-Yo Ma on the other.”

Connecting the ends of The 606, Whitehead is collaborating with Chicago Wilderness Alliance and the USA National Phenologic Network to develop a climate-monitoring installation. The artwork will consist of a line of 453 native, flowering trees (Apple Serviceberry), whose five-day bloom spread will visualize Chicago's famous Lake Effect. The temperature-sensitive plants (what Whitehead calls “environmental sentinels”) will reveal how large bodies of water like Lake Michigan affect local temperature patterns in spring and fall. Modeled after Japanese cherry blossoms whose transient blooming attracts audiences and signifies warmer weather, the concept of this blooming, phenologic spectacle will allow scientists and citizens to study climate change and observe nature's relationship to the Lake Effect.

These “embedded artworks” along The 606 seem far removed from the world of art galleries. They extend the artistic traditions of earthworks and site-specific interventions; however, for most audiences, a solar observatory, a skate park/performance space, and a climate-monitoring planting align more with science and design. But poking holes through these disciplinary models and challenging limited ideas of art is what defines Whitehead's practice. A self-described “edge dweller,” she says, “Designers see me as an artist and artists see me as a designer. But I'm looking to make art with purpose. I'm looking for both art *and* design, both art *and* science.”

This “both/and” animates Whitehead's work and serves as a model for how artists can use their knowledge for civic innovation to address cultural, social, and environmental issues. It is an example of how artists can work collaboratively across disciplines to reimagine future cities and communities—one trail at a time.

Skate Park + Event Plaza, Frances Whitehead, Collins Engineers, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, in collaboration with Spohn Ranch, Chicago, 2013. Courtesy of The Trust for Public Land, City of Chicago, and Chicago Park District

