Walls Turned Sideways

A 2021 report on the outcomes of community-based research designed to imagine and create an art gallery + community center dedicated to artists and communities impacted by incarceration.
What

*Walls Turned Sideways* is an art gallery and community space dedicated to artists and communities impacted by incarceration. Through exhibitions, political education workshops, and a community care component, *Walls Turned Sideways* will offer a space to experience and create art, share resources, and build solidarity with families of incarcerated people.

Who

*Walls Turned Sideways* has been researched and developed by Pablo Mendoza and Sarah Ross. An advisory board of artists, activists, and formerly incarcerated people shaped the work and direction of the project. The advisory board includes: Eric Blackmon, Kevin Blumenberg, Monica Cosby, Andres Hernandez, Aaron Hughes, Raphel Jackson, Tess Landon, Damon Locks, Joseph Mapp, Muneca Mulero, Anna Martine Whitehead, and Amanda Williams.
Why

More than a decade ago, the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP) started with the vision of connecting inside communities at Stateville prison and outside neighborhoods in Chicago through classes, exhibitions, and events. PNAP teaches classes at Stateville with the guiding principle that art, poetry, and performance created together with incarcerated artists initiates both dialogue and action about the most critical issues of our time. Incarceration removes people from neighborhoods without adequately analyzing the social, economic, and political structures that produce the many conditions of which crime is but a symptom. PNAP’s classes, exhibitions, and events directly respond to these concerns through close collaborations with artists and poets inside prison and the communities they leave behind.

Walls Turned Sideways is an important outgrowth of this work that aims to provide a space to consistently show art of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists; deepen relationships with families and children of incarcerated people; and create communities of care around the very traumatic conditions of incarceration.

Background

Between February and August of 2021, Pablo Mendoza and Sarah Ross conducted research to learn from allied organizations and activists, families of incarcerated people, and currently incarcerated people. Through interviews and surveys we asked: is there a need for an art and community space for families of incarcerated folks? If so, what should it look like and who/what should be involved in such a space? We wanted to know the needs and desires of people who would use the space, even if, due to incarceration, they might never visit it.

In addition to interviews and surveys we took these ideas to Stateville prison in the form of a class, taught by Anna Martine Whitehead, Andres Hernandez, and Amanda Williams. The class thought about how to create liberatory spaces and what a community space their families would visit might be.

Through these avenues of inquiry, creative engagement, and regular meetings with our Advisory Board, the overwhelming feedback we received was:

- There are few spaces in the city, and specifically on the Westside of Chicago, that connect with families and kids of incarcerated people through art, and there are no spaces specifically dedicated to this community.
- There is a need for a space where impacted communities can congregate and educate each other and their loved ones about experiences with incarceration.
- There is a need for a space for formerly incarcerated artists to show and sell their work.
Top: Audiences listen to poetry readings at Uri Eichen Gallery at the *Contingent Citizen* exhibition, 2019; Bottom: Miguel Morales, Drawing from the class *Making Space: Emancipatory Design*, 2021.
Interviews with Organizers, Artists, and Allies

We interviewed more than 20 organizers, artists, and allies who generously shared their time and insights with us about everything from the nuts and bolts of running an organization, to problems and challenges we will certainly face. Below is a list of people we interviewed, along with important takeaways from our conversation.

**Interviewees**

**Angela Taylor & Mike Tomas** Garfield Park Community Council

**Arewa Winters** Justice for Families (of BLM)

**Benny Lee** National Alliance for the Empowerment of the Formerly Incarcerated

**Cindy Eigler & Mark Clements** Chicago Torture Justice Center

**Courtney Bowles & Mark Strandquist** People’s Paper Coop

**Deana Lewis & Rachel Caídro** Love & Protect

**Delia Ramirez** IL State Representative

**Elena Quintana & Larry Barrett** Institute for Public Safety and Social Justice

**Julie Anderson** Restore Justice

**Karen Reyes** Firebird Community Arts

**Kevin Blumenberg** Accluvist Inc. Community Navigator; People’s Lobby Mass Liberation Community Organizer

**Kimeco Robertson & Augie Torres** READI Chicago

**Kristiana Rey Colón** Let Us Breathe Collective

**Leah Gibson** School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Art Therapy

**Melissa Lorain** Theatre Y

**Omar Magana** Open Center for the Arts Chicago

**Orlando Mayorga** The Justice Equity Opportunity Initiative, Lt. Gov. Office

**Salome Chasnoff** P.O. Box Collective

**Souzan Nasser** MAMAS
The space would be an important connection for families of impacted folks. Seeing the art of family members would be like a visitation without a visitation. The presence goes a long way.

-- Benny Lee, National Alliance for the Empowerment of the Formerly Incarcerated

There are lots of victim support groups, not a lot of family support groups. There is no transparency at IDOC, you don’t know what’s going on. It would be useful for family members to know what is happening at the different prisons.

-- Julie Anderson, Restore Justice

The first thing that popped into my mind is the Black Panthers Headquarters. Yes the space would be helpful--folks could get resources and connect to others going through what they are going through with resource support and moral support.

-- Larry Barrett, Institute for Public Safety and Social Justice

Westside is territorial, you have to get buy-in from the community. Be authentic about how the community can organize the space. If there are artists in the community who want to use the space, make sure that they can use it.

-- Arewa Winters, Justice for Families (of BLM)
Surveys

In the spring of 2021 we surveyed incarcerated artists at Stateville and families of incarcerated people. Pablo Mendoza compiled and analyzed the surveys. A preliminary reading of the survey responses, taking in a sample size of 33% of the total responses, answered our central questions. 100% of those participants found a great need for a community space like the one envisioned by *Walls Turned Sideways*. When incarcerated artists were asked if their loved ones would visit such a space, they answered in the affirmative. While some participants acknowledged that it would be difficult for them to visit due to travel distance, they still agreed that an art and community space of this kind is needed. Below are some survey responses from incarcerated artists and families and friends of currently incarcerated people.

*Art is just as important to the families. This is important to us as a family because of the excitement it brings not only my husband but our children and family, as well. It also brings normalcy into our lives.*

-- Melly Ríos

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*My daughter visited one of the art exhibits, and she was super excited to be a part of something I was involved [in]. [M]e being incarcerated for so long, it connects me to the younger generation in my family [which] really hasn’t had a chance to really meet me.*

-- Johnny Taylor

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*I’m not from Chicago, I’m from Texas, but regardless of where art is shown, it’s an indicator that someone has a voice that wants and needs to be heard.*

-- Manuel “Manny” Gonzalez
Survey participants were offered the chance to envision what a gallery/community space should look like and what kind of programming *Walls Turned Sideways* should offer. Many of them seized this opportunity and thought of programming that they would like to see happen at the space. Below are some suggestions:

写作工作坊聚焦于结构性暴力和谈判生存与施暴暴力并朝着创造恢复自由的语言而努力。

——Anonymous

培训——如何倡导，支持，获取资金，与当地草根组织对话。[制作]抗议海报。

——Anonymous

一个空间为孩子的孤儿准备的，以及处理一个关押的父母和心灵疗愈的空间。

——Yaneth Flores

一个开放的[米克]夜晚，邀请其他的诗人加入并表达他们自己。

——Johnny Taylor

我们的访谈和调查确认了文化空间的重要性，为被监禁的人们服务。这些墙把朋友和家人与被监禁的亲人分开，只是监禁的许多方式之一，监禁创造了许多深层次的分离。进一步，最近的一份报告由*Taskforce on Children of Incarcerated Parents*指出，孩子和看护者经历一系列的困境，当父母被监禁—情感的，经济的，等—并且“被监禁的孩子有更大的风险被剥夺参与政治或公民的参与。”我们相信*Walls Turned Sideways*将帮助连接人，文化，教育和政治的参与。
Making Space: Emancipatory Design
Class at Stateville Prison

In the summer of 2021, Anna Martine Whitehead, Andres Hernandez, and Amanda Williams taught a workshop at Stateville (via correspondence due to COIVD) called Making Space: Emancipatory Design with the intention of visioning a future Walls Turned Sideways gallery and community space. The class read about historical community organizations and the spaces they made together. Students crafted written and visual responses to explore what community spaces can do. Images appearing throughout this report are from the class.

Our Vision: *Walls Turned Sideways*

Based on our research and regular feedback from Advisory Board members we developed four program areas to create a dynamic and connected space.

**Art, Writing, and Performance**  
created by artists at Stateville prison and artists in the city will anchor exhibitions in the gallery, while teaching artists and writers will host workshops in the community space. Each exhibition will host programming designed to bring together loved ones of incarcerated people and general audiences for art-making based on the themes of the exhibition.

**Political Education**  
is a monthly series that will use popular education models to learn about criminal legal policy that impacts families of people locked up. We will collaborate with advocacy and legal organizations to support this series to offer relevant information to families and ways to stay involved. In addition, we will work with volunteer paralegals and lawyers to hold much-needed legal clemency and expungement workshops.

**Community Building**  
will invite neighbors to lunches and dinners to talk about this work. We will make *Walls Turned Sideways* accessible to community groups in the area that need meeting spaces, exhibition spaces, etc. By offering our time to support community-driven work, even when its focus is not on issues of criminalization and incarceration or art, we believe we can build stronger alliances across communities and concerns.

**Community Care**  
includes hosting transformative justice circles, work with healing practitioners and drop-in hours to support families, children, and formerly incarcerated people. For drop-in hours we will use the HOMAGO model (Hang Out, Make Art, Geek Out). This means having available art supplies and space, computers, and couches to make the space comfortable for organic connections and creations.
Conclusion

Our interviews, surveys, creative engagement, and lived experiences make abundantly clear that the crisis of incarceration exacerbates traumas and leaves them untreated. Incarceration disconnects and distances families and kids from their loved ones, strains relationships, and fosters isolation. There is a deep need to build and sustain community spaces that bring together people impacted by criminalization and incarceration in dynamic and creative ways.

Walls Turned Sideways proposes art as a tool to interrogate the stigmas of incarceration, strengthen collective identity, and reflect the beauty and resistance in communities impacted by incarceration. We envision a creative and critical engagement that will ensure access to art, political education, and bring people together in a supportive and mutually caring way.

Thank You

The Arts Work Fund generously supported our research. This exploratory research and outreach would not have been possible without their support. Thank you!

A huge thank you to our Advisory Board for time on zoom and in person, thinking through connections and ideas for this project. Tempestt Hazel, Eric Blackmon, Ryan Griffis, Yanet Flores and many others gave additional time to support our visions. Jason LaFountain closely edited this report and Eliza Gonring and Sarah Ross co-designed it. Finally, thank you to the PNAP crew which always makes space to build connections and imagine the impossible.