

Housing Works History: A Conversation with Gavin Browning

by Emma Raddatz

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Artist Anton Van Dalen's image was used on Housing Works's first Gay Pride float: a home on wheels. Photographer unknown.

Gavin Browning, director of Public Programs and Engagement at Columbia University School of the Arts, talks with Choice about *Housing Works History*, a digital archive and timeline chronicling the interconnected social, political, and personal histories of Housing Works.

Can you briefly describe your project, *Housing Works History*, and discuss any past exhibits or projects that inspired this work?

I've lived in New York City for many years. I've often shopped at Housing Works thrift shops and attended readings and panel discussions at its used bookstore in SoHo. One day while walking down Crosby Street, I looked up and saw a Housing Works flag outside one of these stores. The logo reminded me of the gay pride triangle, but it also looked like a roof. I wondered, "What does Housing Works actually do?"

I learned that the organization was founded in 1990 by four members of the direct-action group ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, who understood that housing is a form of health care. How can people be expected to get healthy—to take a pill everyday—if they don't have a medicine cabinet? If they're focused on finding food and a safe place to sleep? Housing Works put housing first, and they've served over 20,000 clients to date. I became fascinated by this history, which I viewed as "activist real estate development."

My professional background is in book publishing, urban planning, and public programming in the fields of art, architecture, and design (I am the director of Public Programs and Engagement at Columbia University School of the Arts, and *Housing Works History* was an independent "passion" project that I pursued in my free time), so I am interested in telling stories about cities. In 2012, I produced the installation *Living Room: Housing Works Builds Housing* at the Metropolitan Pavilion, a full-scale replica of a Housing Works studio apartment that people could enter. It featured a rudimentary timeline of the organization inspired by the collective Group Material, whose 1989 *AIDS Timeline* traced the cultural and political responses to the epidemic over time. I applied for a grant from the Graham Foundation for advanced studies in the fine arts in 2015 to expand this research into an online multimedia timeline. With the funding, I wanted to include as many voices and forms of media and documentation as possible, and I looked to Studs Terkel's oral histories and Howard Zinn's peoples' histories. This project, I thought, could present the housing within its social and political contexts, while adding more voices and perspectives to our understanding of New York City, homelessness, and the AIDS crisis.

Housing Works History is the result. Using the design of the housing as the window into the history, it highlights architectural drawings, construction photos, and reflections by architects on the housing that has been built.

But these aspects are animated by an archive of primary documents that I assembled over the course of a year and a half. It includes protest ephemera, posters, T-shirts, newsletters, newspaper clippings, court transcripts, personal recollections, and self-produced publications and video portraits in which clients talk about their lives. To this, I overlaid public health data and key moments in housing policy and legislation, so that users would understand the housing in its social and political context. These documents and stories could have easily been lost, but now they are available for free online in a clickable twenty-five-year survey.

What was your experience interviewing key figures from Housing Works programs? How do these videos enhance and work in conjunction with the multimedia timeline?

I worked with filmmaker Laura Hanna to produce five original films spotlighting architects, advocates, and residents of Housing Works housing in Manhattan and Brooklyn. After having studied the drawings of these spaces for many months, it was illuminating to visit them in person. They are vital and welcoming environments.

People don't always know how to read or respond to architectural drawings. They can appear to be nothing more than thin lines, boxes, and numbers. But when accompanied by personal anecdotes, it becomes clear that they correlate to lived experience. These testimonies presented the human and emotional sides of the story, helping to make drawings compelling to a wider audience.

Hanna's films are powerful and could be screened on their own, but integrated into the timeline, they reinforce the other components—original films, archival documents, public health data, housing policy, and legislation. *Housing Works History* is thus one project built from interconnected parts. Users can navigate the material in whatever way they wish, but my aim is that they come away with a greater understanding of the context and complexity of these physical spaces.

What was the process of acquiring and selecting materials like? Do you have any future plans for the project?

Because no comprehensive history of Housing Works existed, I had to piece it together myself. I read archival issues of the Housing Works newsletter *The Key*, as well as minutes of meetings and promotional pamphlets. I would uncover leads, then corroborate details in articles from the *New York Times* and other sources. It wasn't easy. Even a seemingly simple task like compiling a list of addresses of all Housing Works properties was challenging, because the information was not centralized. Papers were filed randomly; things had been lost or thrown away. Of course, this was understandable as Housing Works has been busy fulfilling their mission of ending the twin crises of homelessness and HIV/AIDS, not archiving their history.

Housing Works' President and Co-founder Charles King wrote a letter granting me access to the organization's



Design from Jason Baumann, "The Silence=Death Poster," New York Public Library, November 22, 2013.

files, including dozens of videocassettes. I purchased a TV and VCR and watched about 60 tapes. I borrowed original drawings, slides, and site photos from architects. I asked the staff to share their personal ephemera, and then selected items to digitize and include in the timeline.

Those items have now gone back into drawers and file cabinets, but it would be wonderful if a library or archive would begin to collect them. Housing Works history over twenty-five years showcases the collective creativity of New York City, including the wider worlds of art, fashion, design, and media. Graffiti artist Andre Charles designed a T-shirt. Glenn Close, Michael Graves, Todd Oldham, and I.M. Pei created teddy bears that were auctioned off at a HW fundraiser. Sarah Jessica Parker starred in an advertisement for Housing Works thrift stores. Kartell outfitted the East New York Community Health Center with Philippe Starck's plastic Dr. NO chairs.

In February 2017, Jason Baumann, coordinator of Collection Assessment, Humanities, and LGBT Collections, hosted the launch of *Housing Works History* at the New York Public Library, which also houses the archives of Gran Fury and the Mattachine Society. I had the opportunity to present the timeline and then discuss its implications with Mabel O. Wilson and Felix Burrichter to an audience of over 100 guests, including Housing Works Co-founder Virginia Shubert, Housing Works staff, activists, journalists, and community members. As *Housing Works History* travels around the country to museums, libraries, and universities, I would like to work with educators to create a classroom and community guide on design, health, activism, and the built environment. I do worry, however, that the archive might eventually disappear, as technology and the internet change. Someday soon, the timeline itself will need to be preserved. My ultimate goal is for a library or museum to acquire and host *Housing Works History* to ensure that these voices are preserved for future generations.



What is the intended audience for *Housing Works History*? How do you see undergraduates, for example, using this archive?

I hope students of architecture, urban planning, public health, and the history of social movements will find useful case studies in the timeline. It provides insight into not only the physical design of supportive housing, but also urban politics. Housing Works faced NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) outcries in SoHo, Harlem, and the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where neighbors and politicians blocked housing developments, concerned only about maintaining their property values and irrationally fearful of contracting HIV/AIDS in an era in which people believed you could become infected by touching door handles. In the late 1990s, the Giuliani administration defunded the organization, jeopardizing housing for 220 clients. In response, Housing Works sued the city

and won \$4.8 million.

The timeline might also be a valuable addition to an undergraduate architecture studio focused on supportive housing, because it highlights the contentious nature of urban development. It's not about form alone.

This digital archive carefully illuminates the unseen or hidden history of Housing Works, as well as the Transgender, HIV/AIDS, and female communities the organization in many ways represents. How did you work to connect and illuminate the histories of such communities?

One of Housing Works' trademarks is its responsiveness to need. For example, there were very few non-shelter options that acknowledged gender identity, so Housing Works inaugurated the Transgender Transitional Housing Program in 2004. Next, Housing Works renovated a 7,000 square-foot townhouse in Brooklyn, creating twenty units available beginning in 2009 for women within 24 hours of their release from prison. The women housed in these units not only become healthier—the viral suppression rate is 100 percent—they do not go back into the criminal justice system.

The site also includes a map of New York City with Housing Works properties and programs—how is this project related to the greater history of the city?

The history of Housing Works mirrors the gentrification New York City. As real estate markets changed, and poor and vulnerable people were pushed from the urban core to the periphery, Housing Works responded. It leveraged public-assistance funding for people with AIDS in the early 1990s to rent apartments on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, then sublet them to clients. It opened housing and clinics where the need was greatest: East 9th Street and Avenue D in Manhattan's East Village; the Bedford-Stuyvesant and East New York sections of Brooklyn; the South Central and Fordham sections of the Bronx; the St. George section of Staten Island.

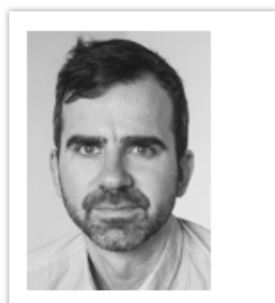
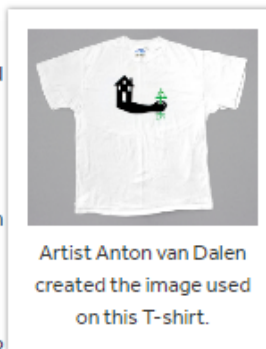
The map charts various programs and properties so that users can see the geographic distribution of Housing Works' efforts. It highlights current properties alongside sites that no longer exist, such as the first thrift store on West 18th Street and St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village, recently razed to make way for luxury condominiums. The map also includes key events such as a 1995 protest against budget cuts, during which activists blocked access to the Queens-Manhattan Tunnel, between East 36th and East 37th Streets. Clicking on this point on the map reveals several items: a poster for the protest; a front-page story in the next day's issue of *Newsday* ("Budget Protest Traps Thousands"); the full episode of AIDS Community Television Program #122, *Protests against Budget Cuts*, by James Wentzy, which contains footage of the demonstrators chanting and being arrested; and a pamphlet titled "Activist Christmas Carols." Imagine *Rudy the City Hall Moron* sung to the tune of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

Users can access the timeline in various ways, reading from 1990 to 2015 or dipping into one or two years only. Geography provides another entry point to the history: What did Housing Works do in Harlem? In Bed-Stuy?

Can you point to a few photographs, objects, documents, etc., that you find particularly representative of the collection or the Housing Works mission and explain why?

I am particularly drawn to a photograph of Housing Works clients and staff at the 1991 Gay Pride Parade. They march alongside a float designed as a home on wheels. A large sign reads "Housing Works: Demand Housing for Homeless People Living with HIV and AIDS." The roof of the home/float is a pink triangle: a symbol of gay power, echoing the famous Silence=Death poster project that was created by Avram Finkelstein in 1987 and subsequently adopted by ACT UP. The demonstrators are wearing T-shirts with an Anton Van Dalen image conveying the notion that housing is more than a physical structure. It is a place of community and empowerment.

Visit *Housing Works History* at <http://www.housingworkshistory.com/>



Gavin Browning is the editor and producer of the multimedia project *Housing Works History* and the editor of the books *Group Efforts: Changing Public Space* and *The Studio-XNY Guide*. He is Director of Public Programs and Engagement at Columbia University School of the Arts. He studied at The New School and Columbia University. website: www.gavin-browning.com; Twitter: @gavinbrowning

(Photo credit: Justin Beck)