

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Candy Chang Culture: So What?!?

Candy Chang · Wednesday, December 11th, 2013



Candy Chang busy creating a *Before I Die* wall. Photo: Kristina Kassem

Culture: So What?!? Each week, we'll be asking thought leaders from all walks of life to answer the question: What is Culture and Why Does it Matter?

This Week's Thought Leader: Internationally acclaimed artist **Candy Chang**. She is passionate about how public spaces can make sense of our lives. *The Atlantic* called her *Before I Die* wall "one of the most creative community projects ever," and *Ad Age* has named her one of the 50 most influential creative thinkers and doers of 2013.

Culture Helps Me Make Sense of the Beauty and Tragedy of Life

A hand-painted sign welcomes people to my neighborhood with an illustration of the levee under a hundred stars. Culture is in the details and the reason a place will stay with you forever. I love New Orleans because it's easy to keep dreaming when you're awake.



New Orleans sidewalk.

Photo: Randal Ford

Welcome to my neighborhood: The colorful shotgun houses look like they were drawn by a five-year-old. Mr. Okra drives by in his produce truck, singing the names of his fruits and vegetables. A dancer performs from the branch of a large oak tree. A man sells burritos from a second floor window. The sign at the tire shop says, "No crack selling. No cat selling. The facts." An old Swedish film flickers for a crowd in a tropical backyard. Girls with tattoos read books and sunbathe in the nude at the clothing-optional swimming pool. People share stories of famous last words in the library's bamboo garden. "You go girl" is written on the tarp covering a crumbling house undergoing renovations. A vacant lot is turned into a park with a giant tree swing for all. One corner of businesses offers praline bacon and Tito Puente records. Traffic stops for a brass band parade of shoebox-sized floats. My 78-year-old neighbor makes a bowl of red beans and rice for a neighbor who lost his wife. "You can't grieve yourself to death," she says, "You've got to remember the good times and keep on."

This is the culture of my neighborhood, which helps me make sense of the beauty and tragedy of life with the people around me.



Before I Die wall in San Francisco, CA. Photo: Kristina Kassem

Candy Chang will be speaking at the [University of Michigan](#) on January 30, 2014. You can learn more about the *Before I Die* project by reading her new book from [St. Martin's Press](#).

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