

Bridge

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Bridge

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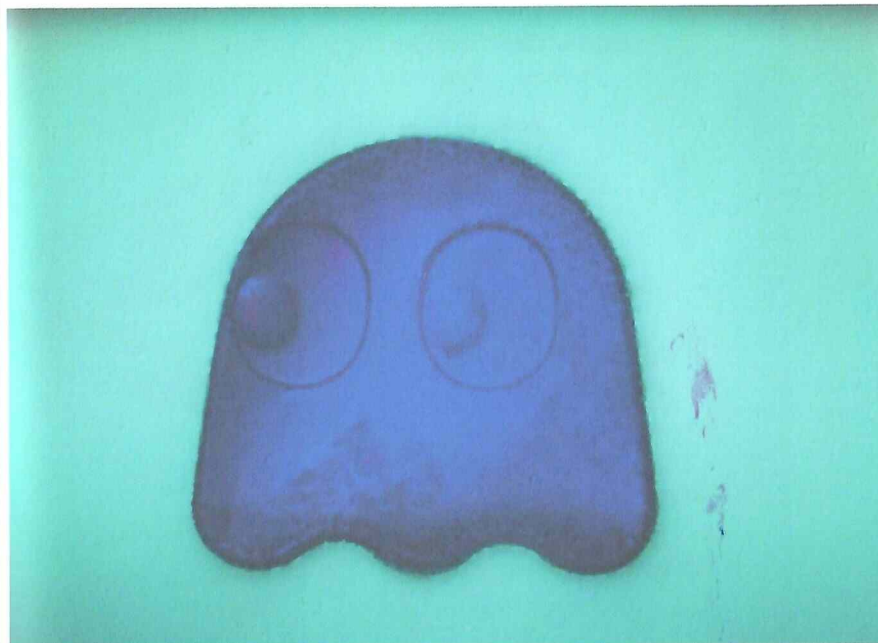
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ON THE COVER

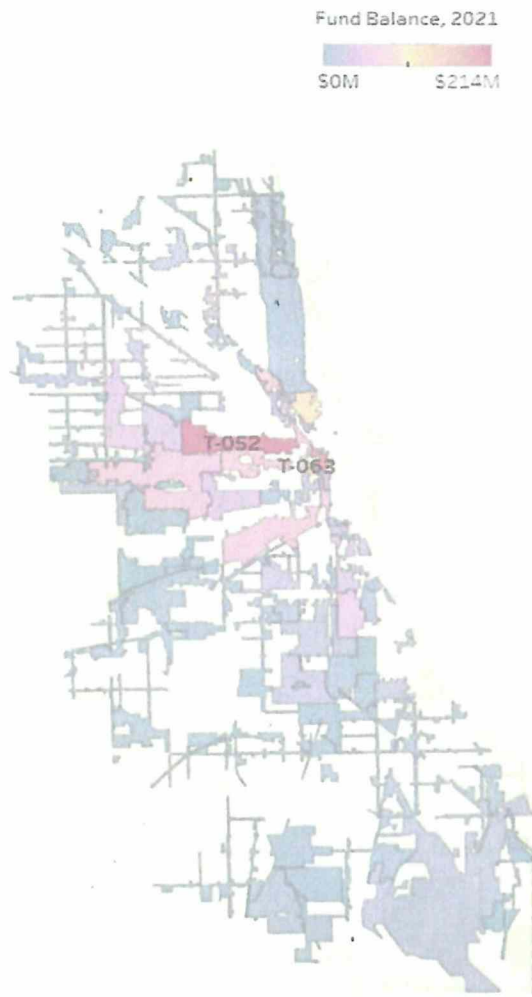
Allen Moore, 2022. Image courtesy the artist.

COLOPHON

Bridge was designed by Faust, a cultural communications firm based in Chicago. The palette for Volume 22, Issue 1 echoes the previous volume, which was derived from the Your Turn campaign '21 by Faust (pictured in the previous volume's Editor's Letter). Layout for this volume was provided by Michael Workman Studio. Primary typography has been set in Source Sans Pro, a sans serif typeface created by Paul D. Hunt and is the first open-source font family from Adobe. It is casebound and printed by Ingram Spark.

*At Bridge, we have long thought of the work done when people band together for collective action through social movements, mutual aid organizations, and not for profits (despite the legitimate differences between them) as critical to our collective well-being. So we have created **Public Utility**, an occasional feature to highlight the work of those whose work we find informative, that push back against institutional hierarchies and elevate the public dialogue to be more inclusive and welcoming of traditionally underrepresented voices, dissidents and that may help inform critical, often neglected issues in the current public discourse.*

This feature will offer a platform for these coalitions to present their case for existing, their central arguments and supporting evidence in hopes of finding the change that their constituencies wish to achieve in society. Artists, too, after all, use the same tools when needed, of urbanism and activism, community organizing, legislative action and remaking of political structures, public policy and institutions.



Tom Tresser, Civic Lab

The TIF Illumination Project

*Left: TIF shapes for 2021 with heat map showing Fund Balance.
Source: Chicago Inspector Generals office.*

The Tax Increment Financing (TIF) Illumination Project is an effort of a group of volunteers in Chicago to investigate and expose a decades-old municipal finance scheme that annually extracts over 800 million dollars of local property taxes and places that money in a program controlled by the Mayor.

The TIF Illumination Project uses data mining, investigatory reporting, graphic design, and community organizing methods to expose and explain this critical part of civic finances to the people. It is part of a national Data Liberation movement that seeks to explain how our public dollars are being used and abused. Their work is archived online at www.tifreports.com.

The TIF Program was started in Chicago in 1986 by Mayor Harold Washington in an attempt to switch the focus of economic development from the Central Loop area to the neighborhoods.

The idea is that the city is seeking to encourage and accelerate economic development in so-called “blighted” or disinvested communities. If you are a private developer and seek to build a thing in a TIF district, you can get up to 30% of your project funded with public dollars through the TIF program. This is not a loan, but an outright gift. A Tax Increment Finance district is created by the City’s Department of Planning and Development, so this program is

under the complete control of the Mayor.

TIFs collect property tax dollars above the base revenues collected by all properties in the TIF district once it is created. So, for example, if a TIF district has 1,000 properties in it, and the total amount of property taxes collected in the recent year is \$1,000 – that is called the Base. Once the TIF goes into effect, the district extracts or REMOVES every penny of NEW property tax dollars collected inside the TIF ABOVE that Base for 23 years.

So, in the example if it is five years into the TIF and this TIF district has seen growth – say, from new properties coming online and from increased value of existing properties such that the total property tax revenues collected inside the TIF in Year 5 is \$5,000 – then the TIF district skims or removes the INCREMENT over the Base (\$1,000), which would be \$4,000. This operation continues for 23 years.

This program has dispensed billions of property tax dollars to major U.S. companies (Wal-Mart, Target, Home Depot, UPS, Coca-Cola, United Airlines, Willis Insurance), to well-heeled developers of Loop office towers and to a collection of connected developers throughout the city. This program has been a source of controversy here for years, but is not readily understood as a public process and has now been adopted by 49 states in the nation.

It is decidedly not a public process and the rationale behind what projects are selected for subsidy in the name of “community development” is not apparent or available for any community to debate or participate in.

Chicago has a notoriously corrupt and opaque government with 37 local councilmen having been sent to prison since 1972. The city was ruled with an iron hand for 43 years by the father and son Daleys and the Democratic Machine had a firm lock on local government for almost one hundred years. This is a tough town for civic engagement, government transparency and grassroots urban policy planning.

The TIF Program has taken on significant political and civic import because it diverts and disperses property taxes. In Chicago about 54 cents of every property tax dollar collected by the city is supposed to go to the Board Of Education. Other units of government that rely on property taxes for significant parts of their budget include the public libraries, the public parks, the city colleges, the county government and the city, itself. So, any entity that steps in and skims, so to speak, hundreds of millions of property tax dollars annually is a grave threat to the finances of local government.

In 2020 Chicago had 136 TIF districts covering about 30% of the city. No other city in America has so many special taxing bodies. In 2020 these TIFs removed a staggering \$820.5 MILLION in property taxes FROM public circulation.

We use these graphics to show how local units of government are STARVED for funding by this process:

A good old pie chart shows that over 14% of ALL property taxes collected inside the City of Chicago are stolen or diverted by its TIF districts.

We use this graphic to show the VICTIMS of the TIF Program. This is how our Chicago property tax dollars are SUPPOSED to flow.

BUT – when a TIF is created it SKIMS the revenue from the TOP – it gets fed first, THEN, what is left is distributed to the local units of government.

So – we can see that while the civics books SAY Chicago Public Schools are SUPPOSED to get 56 cents from every dollar of property tax collected, we can see from the pie chart that our public schools REALLY collect only 45% of all property tax dollars collected inside the city.

We call this out as corrupt and racist!

Spreadsheets and graphs are weapons of liberation!

This is how we make the sausage at the TIF Illumination Project.

4th Ward TIFs took 5.6 million in property taxes in 2011

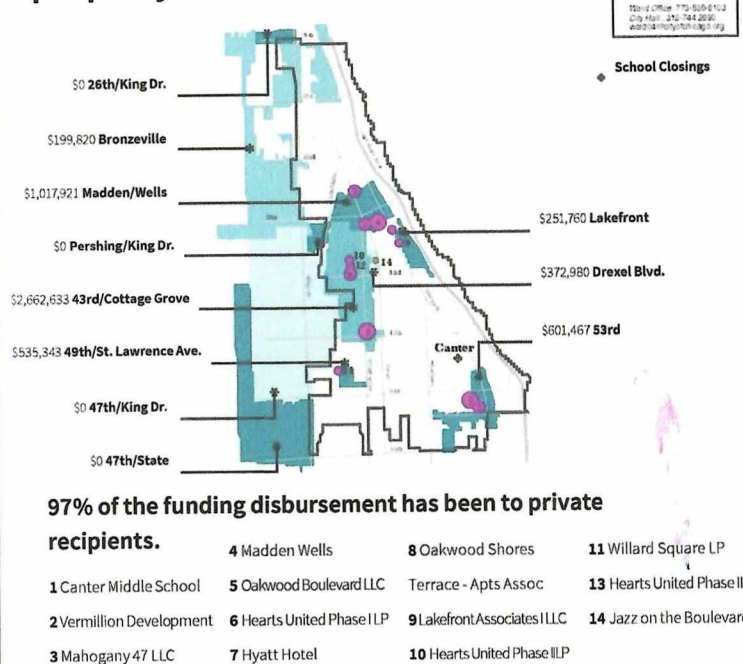


Fig. 1

We grab all the annual reports of Chicago's (or any municipality we work with) and add up the numbers from their balance sheets.

We put our work on giant spread sheets and then report the totals.

It's that simple – and yet NO public agency, nonprofit organization, watch dog group, or grassroots justice entity undertakes this work.

We use this graphic to show the astonishing GROWTH of Chicago's TIF Program and tie it to one man and his political operations. We assert that TIFs are the secret sauce that has powered the modern Democratic Machine in Chicago since 1991!

The TIF Illumination Project is an exercise in civic imagination. It's about civic geography and civic mental map-mapping. We set out to answer the question of “What are TIFs doing to MY community?” If you ask a person “How is life in

the Kinzie Industrial TIF?" they will look at you blankly. But if you ask "How is life in the 27th Ward?" then people can locate themselves and form a response based on their lived experience of that community. We are telling people what TIFs are doing to us a ward-by-ward basis.

Our volunteers have acquired eight different sets of data and using data mining, GIS coding, map making, investigatory journalism and crowd-sourced organizing, we have compiled an unprecedented picture of what TIFs are doing across the city.

We are first invited to a ward to do a TIF Town Meeting, or "Illumination" where we reveal:

- How many TIFs are in the ward
- How much money they extracted from within the ward last year
- How much money was left in the TIF accounts at the start of this year
- What projects were funded by TIFs inside the ward
- How much money was moved in or out of the TIF
- If TIFs in the ward or community are paying off any debt

We produce a graphic poster showing all this against a map of the ward we are covering plus a general piece that explains what TIFs are. We do presentation that walks through the history and scope of the TIF program and then zooms in to reveal the details of the TIFs in the ward we are visiting.

Since 2013 we have done over 186 public meetings on civic finances in front of over 15,000 people. Our presentations are parked at SlideShare.net where over 260,000 people have viewed them! (www.tinyurl.com/CivicLab-Presentations).

Here is the graphic produced for the TIF Illumination of the 4th Ward (Hyde Park, home of the University of Chicago and President Obama) we did on May 13, 2013. FIG. 1. The piece is designed for ledger size, two-sided, full color. The fold is along the left. The front follows this pattern, with a call out to the residents of the ward we are visiting. We identify the major named neighborhoods inside the ward and produce the TIF district shapes as though they are the culprits on a wanted poster. The headline is derived from looking at one or more TIFs that are entirely inside or mostly inside the ward.

The back of the piece remains the same across all our Illuminations and will be updated for meetings to incorporate the latest data. We endeavor to explain what TIFs are using text and graphics. We also call out our original research that revealed that there was a staggering \$1.7 billion in all the TIF accounts at the end of 2011 and 2012.

Map of the 136 Tax Increment Financing Districts - City of Chicago, 2020

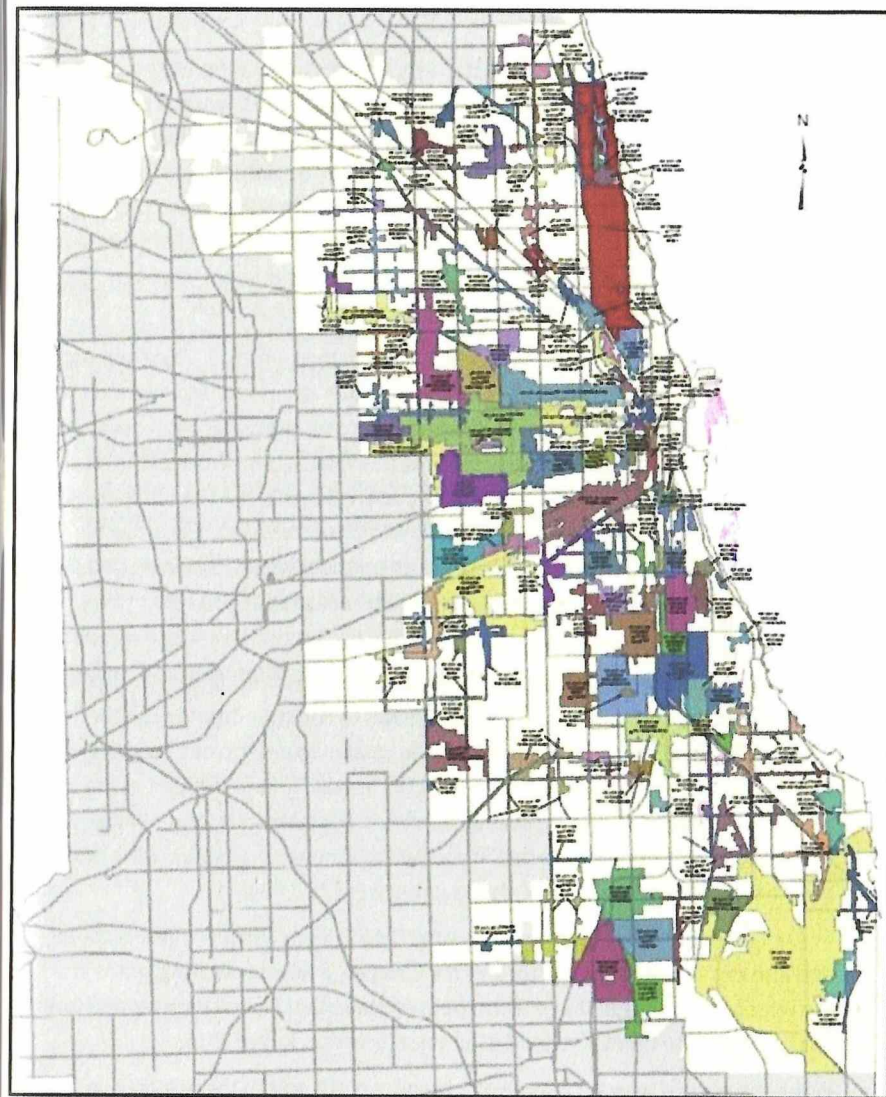


Fig. 2

Our first poster went through seven iterations and was reviewed by one America's most experienced academics in the TIF and local government finance arena. We are constantly testing this work. Is this the best way to explain TIFs. We've translated this part of the poster into Spanish and are working to turn the poster into a comic book and animation.

The heart of the poster is the map of the ward we are Illuminating. Here you see the shape of the lakefront 4th Ward. The 11 TIFs that run through the ward are clearly rendered. No TIF overlaps another TIF but TIFs often migrate across political boundaries. In the case of the 4th Ward four TIFs are 100% INSIDE the ward. Our analysis of the 2011 data showed that four TIFs collected no property taxes inside the 4th Ward. The remaining eight TIFs extracted a total of \$5.6 million of property taxes in 2011. This is the first time this number has been reported. We break news like this every time we do an Illumination.

We also show the major projects funded by TIFs up through 2010. These projects are named and numbered and plotted to the map. It is important to note that TIF funds can ONLY be used for construction-related costs. We break them down into three categories, (1) Public – usually schools, (2) Private commercial projects, and (3) Private nonprofit projects. The size of the dot represents the size of the public subsidy given the project. We sometimes have more details on these projects beyond their names and addresses, but mostly, we lack readily available details. This information is also news and has never been reported or laid out in this manner.

This section is immediately below the map and contains the final exclusive piece of news that the TIF Illumination Project delivers to communities. We use the same data analysis that got us the basic Illumination to determine how much money was LEFT in the TIF accounts FROM the in-ward TIFs at the start of the year. This number is shown in red and asks the provocative question – “What would you do to improve the ward” if you had this money available? In the case of the 4th Ward at the start of 2012, that number was \$15.3 million.

The remainder of this section explains what the TIF Illumination Project is about and also explains that it is a project of the CivicLab, a new co-working space in the West Loop dedicated to collaboration, education and innovation around civic engagement. The CivicLab closed its physical space in July of 2015.

Perhaps the most relevant feature of this entire process from the perspective of the civic arts is that we are combining solid research with data mining with graphic design and storytelling in order to reveal or illuminate what is actually happening to our communities inside one major piece of civic finance and so-called economic development.

Thousands of average citizens have attended these events and received a piece of civic education and that is grounded in their community and made clear and powerful via graphics, PowerPoint slides and the narrative of the presenter. We have shown folks who has gotten paid via TIFs and revealed details hitherto kept secret – including the startling fact that the TIF accounts held \$1.9 billion on January 1, 2021.

The net result is that people ask more questions than can be answered. They are angry. They wonder if the city is truly broke, as the Mayor claims. They want to know who green lighted the projects that received so much public dollars and why are essential city services being cut (including the closing of 49 public schools) at the same time?

This work has spread across the country over the past few years.

The CivicLab is now in conversation with activists from 15 cities around economic justice organizing centered on TIF projects being pushed aggressively in those places.

We are thrilled to see civic indignation evolve into civic imagination as our neighbors are now looking past the corrupt and broken TIF Program toward some new ways of imagining local economic development.

More information on the TIF Illumination Project is online at www.tifreports.com. Our arguments for abolishing the TIF Program here and everywhere are at www.endtifsnow.org. More information on the CivicLab is at www.civiclab.us. Tom Tresser November 2022 tom@civiclab.us.

poet and critic and helped found Context-a magazine of the arts. He produced the first Brecht film festival at Chicago Filmmakers-. He helped found The Nelson Algren Committee (nelsonalgren.org) with Studs Terkel, and with Kurt Jacobsen has produced documentaries on Ed Asner, The American Road, and Clancy Siegal. He was a member of Paul Sills first Story Theater Company.

Richard Minsky is an American scholar of bookbinding and a book artist. He is the founder of the Center for Book Arts in New York City.

Minsky was born in New York City in 1947. In 1960, Minsky obtained his first printing press at the age of 13. In 1968, he graduated cum laude in economics from Brooklyn College. Minsky was awarded a fellowship at Brown University, where he received his master's degree in economics. He pursued a Ph.D. at The New School for Social Research, but left after two years to pursue bookbinding, art and music. He studied bookbinding while at Brown with the University's master binder Daniel Gibson Knowlton.

He founded the Center for Book Arts in 1974 after fourteen years experience as both a bookbinder and printer. Minsky served as the Center's Executive Director until 1977 and its President until 1978. He also served as the Director of Program Development and an instructor in hand bookbinding at the Center. Richard serves on the Book Art Theory subcommittee of the College Book Art Association. The Richard Minsky Archive is at Yale.

Allen Moore is a Chicago based Educator, Curator, Painter, and Experimental Sound Artist. He was born and raised in Robbins Illinois. Allen holds a Masters in Art from Governors State University and a Masters of Fine Art from Northern Illinois University. His work converses with signifiers of Black culture and personal narrative; bringing to view the underlying themes of racial, emotional and socio-economical conditions.

Jeanne Morel is the author of the chapbooks, *I See My Way to Some Partial Results* (Ravenna Press), *Jackpot*, (Bottlecap Press), and *That Crossing Is Not Automatic*, (Tarpaulin Sky Press). She holds an MFA from Pacific University has been nominated for a Pushcart in both poetry and fiction. Her work has appeared in *Black Sunflowers*, *Fugue*, *Great Weather for MEDIA* and other journals. She lives in Seattle.

On the Fly is a cut-up poem in the tradition of William Burroughs, a method also used by David Bowie and Curt Cobain. It includes a line from Richard Hugo, "You tell him no. You're talking to yourself," and was created in part with the text mixing program of the Lazarus Corporation, a coalition of artists, writers, and musicians. lazaruscorporation.co.uk

Tom Tresser (tresser.com) is an educator, organizer, creativity champion, public defender and fighter of privatization. He has been doing civic engagement and grassroots democracy efforts for over 50 years. His first voter registration campaign was in 1972. Tom has acted in some 40 shows

and produced over 100 plays, special events, festivals and community programs. From 1993 through 1995, Tom was director of cultural development at Peoples Housing, in north Rogers Park, Chicago, where he created a community arts program that blended the arts, education and micro-enterprise.

In 2008 he was a co-founder of Protect Our Parks, a neighborhood effort to stop the privatization of public space in Chicago. In 2009 he was a lead organizer for No Games Chicago, an all-volunteer grassroots effort that opposed Chicago's 2016 Olympic bid (nogameschicago.com). Tom was the Green Party candidate for the position of President of the Board of Commissioners of Cook County in November 2010 election. With Benjamin Sugar Tom co-founded The CivicLab, a co-working space where activists, educators, coders and designers came to work, collaborate, teach, and build tools for civic engagement. The space was located in Chicago's West Loop at 114 N. Aberdeen and operated for two eventful years closing on June 30, 2015. Its work continues via publishing and training projects (civiclab.us).

Maura Walsh is a Chicago-based multidisciplinary artist interested in a wide array of media and art forms from painting and fiber, to illustration work and murals. Walsh is passionate about asking hard questions and using her art practice to investigate concepts related to space, hidden histories, injustice, ancestral trauma, the childhood experience, and tenderness.

Michael Workman is an artist, writer and reporter, choreographer, dance, performance art and sociocultural critic. In addition to his work at the *Chicago Tribune*, *Guardian US*, *New City* magazine, WBEZ Chicago Public Radio, and as the Movement Matters columnist at *Art Intercepts*, Workman is also Director of Bridge, a Chicago-based 501 (c) (3) publishing and programming organization. His choreographic writing has been included in *Propositional Attitudes*, an "anthology of recent performance scores, directions and instructions" published by Golden Spike Press, and his *Perfect Worlds: Artistic Forms & Social Imaginaries Vol. 1*, the first in a 3-volume series, was released by StepSister Press in October 2018 with a day-long program of performances at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Most recently, two of his scores were accepted for publication in a special edition of the Notre Dame Review focusing on the work of participants in the &NOW Festival of Innovative Writing. michael-workman.com 📧