This paper examines how ‘cultural brokers’ – actors spanning different institutional fields – can initiate institutional change. Cultural brokers are particularly interesting because they represent a paradox for analyses of institutional change. On one side, being embedded in multiple fields, they can more easily distance themselves from existing institutions and envision alternative institutional arrangements (e.g., Sewell, 1992; Boxenbam & Battilana 2005; cf. Burt, 2004). On the other side, and exactly for the same reason that they are embedded in multiple fields, cultural brokers are also exposed to the role tensions and ambiguities created by the different institutions characterizing the fields that they bridge (e.g. Rao et al. 2000; Furnari, 2014). These role tensions and ambiguities, in turn, constrain the processes by which cultural brokers can mobilize resources for institutional change (e.g. Powell & Owen-smith 2008: 603). Despite the importance of this paradox, we do not have a systematic understanding of how cultural brokers can balance these institutional constraints and opportunities to initiate change. Thus, in this paper I ask: what are the micro-level processes by which cultural brokers can successfully initiate institutional change?

I address this research question through a longitudinal case study of the decision to select global archi-star Frank Gehry as the new icon of Chicago’s public architecture, which was historically oriented towards local Chicago-based architects. This decision occurred unexpected in the context of the Millennium Park (MP)’s project (1997-2004) --a private-public project aimed at celebrating the new Millennium by building a new public park, which was initially planned as a classic beaux-arts garden and later turned into an contemporary avant-garde art park through the selection of the Frank Gehry’s design. I trace this iconic institutional change back to the micro-level actions of a group of civic fund-raisers, operating as cultural brokers between the fields of business philanthropy and public government.

I investigate the micro-level processes by which these cultural brokers successfully initiated this institutional change by qualitatively analyzing and triangulating four types of data: 1) two primary archives (provided first-hand by the MP project’s executive director and by its chief fund-raiser), including 396 unique documents, such as meetings’ minutes and private communications involving all the key actors involved in the change; 2) thirty oral history interviews with these actors, conducted by an architectural historian while Millennium Park was being designed (Gilfoyle, 2006); 3) twenty-five primary interviews with these actors, after the park was completed; 4) secondary archival data (e.g. newspapers, trade journals, books) to reconstruct the history of the Chicago’s public architecture field.

Preliminary findings show that cultural brokers can successfully initiate institutional change through a process that I label Silent Mobilization, which consists of four micro-level practices: avoiding direct confrontation and negotiation with defenders of the institutional status quo; decoupling vision from action; creating differentiated “role-spaces”; and co-opting fence-sitters in silent mobilization efforts.
References