

# PROJECT STATEMENT

As the availability of affordable housing continues to erode, and housing and financial instability reach crisis proportions, *Where the Heart Is: Portraits from Vernacular American Trailer and Mobile Home Parks* investigates this deeply affected, primarily American housing form. This ongoing photographic study challenges the ingrained stereotyping of both the estimated 20 million Americans who live in manufactured housing (as stigmatized trailer and mobile homes are being rebranded) as well as of the rapidly vanishing mobile home parks themselves within which this project is focused.

My images are informed by immersive research into affordable housing and the tarnished American Dream, as well as housing instability, zoning, gentrification, history, and demographics as each relates to the trailer, mobile home and manufactured housing “umbrella”. Ongoing conversations with park residents and managers, and collaboration with professionals involved in urban planning, related scholarly research, and housing advocacy ground the project’s fine art aesthetic within the documentary tradition.

A strong feeling of community exists within many mobile home parks, often created by zoning enforced isolation requiring them to be fenced in and sited in formerly remote areas considered undesirable for traditional residential development. Gentrification has pushed development to surround many parks, making the essential workers, young families, veterans, immigrants, and retiree residents who rely on this largest, non-subsidized form of affordable housing vulnerable. The lack of protective zoning or preservation regulations make parks the target of equity investors, too often leading to the loss of the land rented for residents’ home sites, subsequent eviction, and displacement.

Within “Where the Heart Is”, I am especially drawn to the confined yards and entryways around homes where the density of each site creates such close proximity between the public world right outside and the private world just inside. Here, individual choices in ornamentation and landscaping, despite or due to often limited financial resources, reveal the personalities of the unseen occupants and capture their notions of welcome, of beauty, and of home. These are the personal spaces I delight in discovering and presenting as individual narrative portraits that are in welcome contrast to the anonymity of life in the similar density of the urban high-rise where I live today.

Portraits of individual trailers are also visually classified and constructed into a library of, currently, twenty-five typology grids, archiving differences and commonalities within and across communities and states. This act of observing, collecting, and codifying is imbedded in my creative process and has been the way I’ve engaged with the world since I was a child. I experience the world by seeing and classifying in pattern, color, and light.

I began “Where the Heart Is” in 2017, with travels to date within Maine, New Jersey, California, Texas, Colorado, New York, Georgia, Oregon, and Arizona. Time, resources, and social distancing permitting, my intention is to continue creating the project’s taxonomy by further exploration within the South and the Midwest while collaborating with park residents to incorporate their narratives and images.

# BIO

Kathleen Tunnell Handel is a photographer engaged in a long-term research based investigation of the affordable housing subgenre of mobile home and manufactured housing communities. Her immersive project “Where the Heart Is: Portraits from Vernacular American Trailer and Mobile Home Parks” includes images from communities, to date, within Maine, California, New York, New Jersey, Georgia, Texas, Oregon, Arizona, and Colorado.

Tunnell Handel’s extensive research, conversations with park residents and managers, and collaboration with related professionals, scholars, and housing advocates, all continue to inform her photographic work and her growing advocacy for affordable housing.

Tunnell Handel’s earlier studies in observational and systems-based life sciences at Cornell University, through her exploration of the visual arts and being awarded a BFA in Textile Design from the Rhode Island School of Design, to ongoing studies of photography, have all contributed to her deep interest in visual culture and themes of memory, life systems, and the human experience.

She lives in NYC and the Berkshires of MA and photographs widely.