Commentary: Project Row Houses: Arts, Culture, and Collective Creative Action

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See “Collaborative Art: A Transformational Force within Communities” by Bublitz et al., in this issue.

Project Row Houses (PRH) was founded in 1993 to be the catalyst for transforming community through the celebration of art and African American history and culture. Inspired by the work of German avant-garde artist Joseph Beuys and African American painter Dr. John Biggers, a group of seven Black artists, working and living in Third Ward, purchased 22 historic shotgun-style row houses on two blocks in a disinvested neighborhood and began using the houses as spaces for thematic art interventions. These artists leveraged a broad perspective of art, stemming from Beuys’s concept of art as “social sculpture,” the idea that art is about how individuals shape the world around them. The seven founders of PRH—James Bettison, Bert Long Jr., Jesse Lott, Rick Lowe, Floyd Newsum, Bert Samples, and George Smith—perpetuated Beuys’s radical tenet that each individual is an artist, and art can be a continually evolving collective undertaking.

In keeping with the expansive vision of art as social sculpture, the founders believed that creativity was ultimately about utilizing resources in novel ways to address problematic circumstances. As they began to renovate and activate the shotgun houses, their presence on Holman Street gave them an intimate lens into the day-to-day life of the neighborhood, which resulted in immediate awareness of community needs.

Three years into PRH’s lifetime, the first executive director, Deborah Grotfeldt, realized that the neighborhood had a higher-than-average number of young single mothers working part-time and attending school part-time, striving to raise children as best they could with limited means and support. Deborah, the founding artists, and neighborhood collaborators began to utilize their resources—both the houses as well as their personal creativity—to seek a solution, building partnerships along the way.

The year 1996 saw the beginning of PRH’s signature Young Mothers Residential Program (YMRP), made possible in large part by partnering with several community stakeholders, including US Homes and Trinity United Methodist Church, a congregation across the street. Dr. Nelda Lewis, a social work professor at Texas Southern University, wrote the black parenting curriculum that became the cornerstone of the program. While US Homes updated seven of the historic shotgun houses, invigoring their historic aesthetic with modern amenities within, PRH implemented Dr. Lewis’s curriculum as part of the residency for single mothers and their children to live on site, developing among them a village-style setting where a community was created so all could flourish.

PRH cultivated an intentional spirit of attentiveness, constantly listening to the lived experience of community residents and stakeholders. Over time, it became clear that the deficit of affordable housing in the neighborhood was another problematic circumstance to be addressed. Therefore, PRH established a relationship with Rice University, concentrating on a program within the School of Architecture called Rice Building Workshop (RBW).

PRH invited RBW into empathetic relationships with community members in Third Ward, including YMRP participants. Through mutualistic exchange, community residents and architecture students designed shotgun-house-inspired residences to be built as locally managed sliding-scale affordable housing, matching and promoting the aesthetic identity of the neighborhood. These relationships wrote a new script for how academia could support community organizers in developing local solutions to systemic problems, simultaneously honoring the visual and communal fabric of the neighborhood as captured in its relevant architecture.

The connection with the university helped promote and share the finished results of this collaborative process. First concentrated in one strip of shotgun-house-inspired duplexes, then two strips, eventually growing into three distinct sites with nearly 60 units, this partnership brought real change into the neighborhood for individuals, families, and a city striving to understand the impact that community art can have. In both tangible and intangible ways, the work of PRH continues to write new narratives for Third Ward through collective creativity.

In the fall of 2017, four months after the reopening of a newly renovated neighborhood park, PRH opened Round 47: The Act of Doing: Preserving, Revitalizing and Protecting Third Ward, organized by PRH’s curator and programs director,
Ryan Dennis, featuring seven neighborhood-centric art installations related to the topics of gentrification and community-led strategies for resistance. This round grew out of prior organizing, which resulted in the Emancipation Economic Development Council, an unprecedented coalition of neighborhood organizations and stakeholders working to support the revitalization of Third Ward as a historic and culturally rich neighborhood while preventing the displacement that often accompanies development.

The Round 47 installations provided the visual narrative of the work PRH had already done in convening community organizers for resident-driven neighborhood development and served as spaces for continued collaborations. The installations spoke in chorus about the tensions of living in a rapidly changing neighborhood, edifying the resilience of legacy residents and their contributions to the neighborhood's history and culture while also providing galvanizing imagery around which residents could rally.

Marc Furi's "I Love Third Ward" house included a dramatic site-specific mural that he used to launch a branded-product line to promote community identity. The design appears on t-shirts, mugs, and as the backdrop for a line of videos featuring neighborhood residents and public figures speaking about their love for Third Ward.

The installations, Marc Furi’s among them, served as a medium for transmitting and reinforcing community values, attitudes, beliefs, and shared responsibility to protect and preserve this history. Even though the installations have been deinstalled, visitors still come seeking to pay homage to the "I Love Third Ward" mural, hoping to contribute to the cache of shared emotional experiences.

Through arts and creativity, community enrichment, and neighborhood development, PRH has demonstrated over its 25-year-plus history that collective community art-making is a sustainable vehicle for community transformation. This radical exploration of social sculpture has transformed 39 structures in a historically underserved community and countless lives along with them. As a project where the contributions of innumerable participants have been welcomed and uplifted, these individuals have developed strong emotional ties of loyalty and pride to PRH and Third Ward. PRH is a leader in the field of community-based art, demonstrating the transformation that is possible on the individual and collective scale.

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