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# The Artist-Developer

## A Case Study of Impact through Art-Centered Community Development in Neighborhoods of Color

AUGUST 2024 | AISHA DENSMORE-BEY



JOINT CENTER FOR  
HOUSING STUDIES  
OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY

**Joint Center for Housing Studies  
Harvard University**

**The Artist-Developer:  
A Case Study of Impact through Art-Centered  
Community Development in Neighborhoods of Color**

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August 2024

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## **Abstract**

In this report, which is derived from my dissertation at the Harvard Graduate School of Design completed in October 2023, I delve into the community development efforts of Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas. The research was conducted with the support of the Joint Center for Housing Studies. The dissertation examined three prominent African American artists who have used arts-based real estate development to create positive change in their neighborhoods, one of them being Rick Lowe, co-founder of Project Row Houses. Through a multiple case study approach, I investigated the real estate, design, and artistic actions that led to the creation of these projects and the social benefits that followed. These benefits include social cohesion, adherence to social health determinants, minimization of displacement, and the perception by community members of a strong cultural identity for each neighborhood. In the original work, by comparing the work of all three artists, I gained insights from community partners, residents, and those within the organizations. While the three arts-based development projects have positively impacted their neighborhoods, it is essential to note the challenges of maintaining an arts-led community organization. Ultimately, these projects cannot please everyone, but their benefits are far-reaching, including improved social cohesion and cultural preservation. The following excerpt illustrates Project Row Houses as a case study in creative and robust holistic community development.

## **Impetus for Research and Acknowledgements**

Part of why this research was essential to me as an architect-artist who hopes one day to immerse myself in real estate, is rooted in the permanence of African American spaces and storytelling. When I began my doctoral journey, I investigated the concept of the artist, urban policy, and their relationship to gentrification. I personally experienced the trauma of being displaced, having familial history erased, and having to relocate due to a larger gentrifying institution, and I wanted to understand how artists and non-traditional workers could exist, and thrive, in cities. This investigation pivoted from a view of the artist in the city as passive and reactive to a standpoint of the artist as more active, willful, and in some ways nonconformist. It has been an honor, and at times an excruciating, intimidating, but beautiful experience, to look at these artists and organizations and to interview all the generous people who have shared with me. Thank you for your time, perspectives, and vulnerability.

I am grateful to the Harvard Mellon Urban Initiative, the Harvard GSD Real Estate Research Grant, the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, the Healthy Places Design Lab, and the Doctor of Design Program for their support of my research.

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## **Introduction**

Since the early 2000s, there has been a resurgence of the arts serving as an economic driver for cities to establish themselves as cultural centers, create tourist destinations, and revitalize neighborhoods. Richard Florida's 2002 publication of *The Rise of the Creative Class* influenced many municipalities to push for arts and culture as a lure (Ley 2003, Bulick et al. 2003). In a talk discussing his 2018 book *Culture as Weapon: The Art of Influence in Everyday Life*, Nato Thompson, past chief curator of public arts organization Creative Time, argues that cities had used access to art as part of the "brand of urban living" (Strand Book Store 2017). The dissertation explores artist-led and art-based community development in urban areas.

Conversations surrounding urban neighborhoods and social justice have expanded to include art and wellness. Urban planner Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson, chair of the National Endowment for the Arts,<sup>1</sup> spoke about the importance of art-based planning in communities in a webcast on December 7, 2022:

Increasingly, I am interested in the role of arts in relation to public health, particularly as the public health sector continues to expand its notion on what are determinants of health outcomes, and it begins to meander into the world of community development and planning. I think there is a really robust opportunity for the arts to be in that mix. So as they think about housing, racial inequity, and other things that for many years have traditionally thought about as health issues, I think there's a lot of opportunity for the intersection of arts, culture, and design with health in that space of community development and planning.<sup>2</sup>

The Executive Branch of the US government recognizes the importance of art-based and cultural development in US neighborhoods. On September 30, 2022, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. signed Executive Order 14084 - Promoting the Arts, the Humanities, and Museum and Library Services, which in part states:

It is the policy of my Administration to advance the cultural vitality of the United States by promoting the arts, the humanities, and museum and library services. To that end, my Administration will advance equity, accessibility, and opportunities for all Americans, particularly in underserved communities as defined in Executive Order 13985 of January 20, 2021 (Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government) so that they may realize their full potential through the arts, the humanities, and access to museum and library services. (Executive Office of the President 2022)

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<sup>1</sup> NEA, "Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson, NEA Chair," <https://www.arts.gov/about/dr-maria-rosario-jackson-chair-page>.

<sup>2</sup> Local Initiatives Support Corporation and NEA, "Reflections from NEA Chair Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson with Asian Arts Initiative/Friends of the Rail Park and IDEAS xLab webcast," 2022, quote at 21m:53s, <https://www.lisc.org/our-initiatives/creative-placemaking/main/public-events/>.

Therefore, it is an opportune time to reexamine the importance of arts programs and arts-related real estate and community development in some African American communities that have been historically under-resourced, and to explore how artists might lead that charge. The relationship between artists and neighborhood evolution has been widely studied but, until recently, rarely triangulated with race or ethnicity. However, a new public discourse regarding African American artists and local community engagement is underway. In the summer of 2021, an exhibit at Gagosian New York titled *Social Works* highlighted Black artists whose work aligned with "today's cultural movement, in which numerous social factors have converged to produce a heightened urgency for Black artists to utilize space as a community-building tool and means of empowerment."<sup>3</sup>

In the program book for the exhibition, Rick Lowe describes a conversation with artists Theaster Gates and Mark Bradford that examined their responsibility as successful artists to respond to the physical space of Black communities.<sup>4</sup> This question of artist responsibility is one that quite a few Black artists and creatives are pondering. There are multiple Black arts development projects focusing on Black space and cultural preservation, community revitalization, and pride that are perceived (at least externally) as vital components of their neighborhoods. Antwaun Sargent listed in *Social Works* (2021) arts development projects nationally and internationally that were invested in the work:

An informal network of Black spaces, being constructed both physically and digitally, uses art as a catalyst to engage in social labor and to address aspects of a vast history of lack. They include: **Project Row Houses, Houston; Stony Island Arts Bank [part of the Rebuild Foundation], Chicago;** NXTHVN, New Haven; Project EATS, New York; Black Rock Senegal, Dakar; See In Black; the Underground Museum, Los Angeles; Home by Ronan Mckenzie, London; **Art + Practice, Los Angeles;** ARTS.BLACK; Conceptual Fade, Philadelphia; Yardy NYC, New York; We Buy Gold, Brooklyn; Medium Tings, Brooklyn; BKhz, Johannesburg; Black Artist Retreat, Chicago; SON, Los Angeles; Jenkins Johnson Projects, Brooklyn; Black Art Library, Detroit; Summaeverythang, Los Angeles; Bubblegum Club, Johannesburg; Ghetto Gastro, Bronx; etc. (Sargent et al. 2021, 5-6, emphasis added)

Three of the projects Sargent mentioned (those in **bold**) were the case studies for my dissertation. I explored three internationally acclaimed neighborhood development projects by artists Rick Lowe with Project Row Houses, Theaster Gates with the Rebuild Foundation, and Mark Bradford with Art+Practice. These projects are highly lauded, consistently covered in media, and considered extraordinary

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<sup>3</sup> Gagosian, "Social Works: Curated by Antwaun Sargent," Press Release, June 2, 2021, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2021/social-works-curated-by-antwaun-sargent/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Rick Lowe in Conversation with Walter Hood," in Sargent et al. (2021), 40.



prototypes for integrating art and cultural identity into neighborhood development. All three were keen on utilizing the architectural assets and typologies that already existed in their neighborhoods to enhance their projects and add value to the areas. Each artist began with relatively small renovation projects, but their continuous work has their neighborhoods evolving into cultural districts. All are in African American communities and incorporate art and social service aspects, housing, job training, and wellness programming. These types of projects' cultural, health, spatial, and social significance deserves closer analysis. For this paper I will share the research and focus on the earliest established of the three, Project Row Houses.

My overall research investigated artists of color who have established urban development projects in African American neighborhoods to determine how their influence was perceived regarding community stability, culture preservation, and equity. It focused on two key questions:

1. How are nationally lauded arts-based development projects perceived in their communities in terms of neighborhood outcomes, including displacement and culture loss in African American areas?
2. What can be learned about the potential for such arts-based initiatives to benefit their local communities?

Several researchers argue that artists and arts-based development have improved mental health, resulted in better community cohesion, and sparked neighborhood activism to resist displacement (Fancourt and Finn 2019; Thomas, Pate, and Ranson 2015; Lydersen 2004). One early consideration is whether evaluating organizations like these based on their effectiveness in solving social issues is fair. Should art serve another purpose outside of art? If so, is it in danger of being a means to an end or something almost transactional? The dissertation aims not to frame art and social practice as purely an economic or urban development tool but to investigate whether there were supplemental benefits that these three arts-based development projects created independent of their original purpose. Is it possible that positive perceptions of impact by neighborhood residents may be enough of an advantage for these projects to be considered successful? How can a comprehensive evaluation of the project's success use subjective measures?

It is important to note that while Lowe, Gates, and Bradford are often recognized as the driving forces behind these case study projects, they all collaborated with other artists, philanthropists, and community activists or organizations during their initial development.

In addition to answering questions about each project's inception, it is important to look at early community collaborations (if any) and initial impressions of what these case studies could be. This

research is important because it interrogates how these famous projects may be perceived by the neighborhoods they primarily impact. The dissertation also contributes to the literature on artists as real estate and community developers, even though Lowe and Gates's organizations have been studied (Brynjolson 2019; Ferry 2018; Samborska 2016; Smith 1998). Despite this valuable prior work, there is still limited dialogue in academic literature regarding artists as property developers and even less about African American artist-developers. This research examines the results, strategies, challenges, and opportunities demonstrated by these projects, founded in different decades and cities in the United States.

For this paper, which is a case study of one of the three projects, I examine Project Row Houses. First, in order to understand how the case study site fits into the larger picture, I present an overview and look at the city of Houston where Project Row Houses resides and the economic conditions that occurred during the project's inception and in the early 2020s. I look at the Third Ward neighborhood's physical and social history, including when it grew into being an African American enclave. Then, I describe Rick Lowe, his relationship to the neighborhood, his art practices, examples of work, awards won, and how Project Row Houses fits into or was an extension of his existing art practice. I describe why the Third Ward was selected for intervention and the chronological development of the organization. I note any notable partnerships, collaborations, or real estate decisions that played a role in the impetus of this project. Next, I examine Project Row Houses during the time of my research (2022-2023), detailing organizational structure, financial and programmatic supporters, and programs for the neighborhood and the general public. Lastly, I describe neighborhood dynamics, including what internal and external factors are happening during my research and what challenges remain. I detail the perceptions of these organizations by neighborhood residents, community activists, local artists, businesses, and city planners.

It is important to note that since the publication of this research in October 2023, there have been some changes in staff at PRH; the reader will understand the information reflects the period of research up until that date.



**Figure 1** Rick Lowe. Photograph by Stefan Ruiz.

**PROJECT ROW HOUSES OVERVIEW**

Date of Establishment	Founder(s)	Mission Statement
1993	<b>Rick Lowe</b> , James Bettison, Jesse Lott, Floyd Newsum, Bert Samples, and George Smith.	“We empower people and enrich communities through engagement, art, and direct action.”
Organizational Structure	Social Services Provided	Housing
Non-profit	+ F.A.C.E. Program + Food distribution + Small business incubation + Third Ward Tutoring + Young Mothers Residential Program	70 low-mid income housing units via PRH CDC.

**Table 1** Project Row Houses Overview Chart

## **General Overview**

Artist Rick Lowe collaborated with six other artists to conceive of Project Row Houses (Figure 2), recognized as an early example of arts-based cultural and community programming, which included a residence program for single mothers, community enrichment programs, and a small business incubator (Dennis 2018). Founded in 1993 to fuse art with community activism, they have been described as the heartbeat of Houston's historic Third Ward neighborhood. Project Row Houses (PRH) celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2023 and has been listed in the *New York Times* as one of the 25 Most Influential Works of American Protest Art Since World War II (La Force et al. 2020). PRH has received



**Figure 2** Aerial View of Project Row Houses on Holman Street in 2015. Photo by Peter Molick courtesy of Project Row Houses.

early support from the National Endowment of the Arts, the Menil Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and countless others. Project Row Houses has nurtured and collaborated with hundreds of local and nationally known artists while working to maintain the Third Ward and its residents with numerous

programs and social services, a community development corporation, and a preservation arm. Project Row Houses is a staunch advocate for preserving the character and long-term residents of the Third Ward. While their efforts have been influential, the real estate market and lack of zoning in Houston has advanced in the neighborhood. As of 2023, the Third Ward is experiencing the tension of gentrification, with new developments being placed against older and sometimes substandard housing. Still, Project Row Houses' significance cannot be overstated as it is a vital anchor and landmark for the Third Ward. Project Row Houses has grown from the original 22 houses sitting on 1.5 blocks to its current footprint of approximately five blocks and 39 properties.<sup>5</sup>

## **Houston**

When Project Row Houses was founded in 1993, the citizens of Houston, Texas voted down a proposal to apply zoning regulations to the city (McDonald 1995). During that same election the incumbent Mayor Robert “Bob” Lanier won re-election. During Lanier’s tenure as mayor from 1992 to 1998, he instituted tax-increment investment zones (TIRZ),<sup>6</sup> which “turned parts of town that were considered eyesores into some of [Houston’s] most popular and expensive neighborhoods” (Johnson 2014).

Portions of the Third Ward have received a TIRZ designation<sup>7</sup> and the City of Houston’s GIS Open Data Portal shows that Project Row Houses lies in a tax increment reinvestment zone and an Opportunity Zone, and the I-45 highway (which borders the Third Ward) is undergoing expansion.<sup>8</sup> Like most American cities after the pandemic of 2020, Houston is experiencing a construction boom. Ranking 11th as one of the best cities to live in the United States as of 2022 (Mistretta 2022a), the city is enjoying rapid economic development (Mistretta 2022b). By 2022 Houston was capitalizing on a 70 percent job recovery since the 2020 pandemic lows (Mistretta 2022b). The city is experiencing a rush of industries building large projects within the metropolitan area, like the new Hewlett Packard Enterprise Headquarters and the Texas Medical Center Expansion (Mistretta 2022b). New construction for the Ion

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<sup>5</sup> Information from the Project Row Houses “We are Artists, We are Neighbors” pamphlet and walking map, part of the collection of Aisha Densmore-Bey, obtained on a site visit, August 2022.

<sup>6</sup> “Special zones created by City Council to attract new investment in an area.” Harris County, Texas, “Economic Development,” <https://hcoed.harriscountytexas.gov/tirz.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> The area around Project Row Houses is a TIRZ.

<sup>8</sup> Greater Houston Partnership, <https://www.houston.org/news/statement-north-houston-highway-improvement-project>.

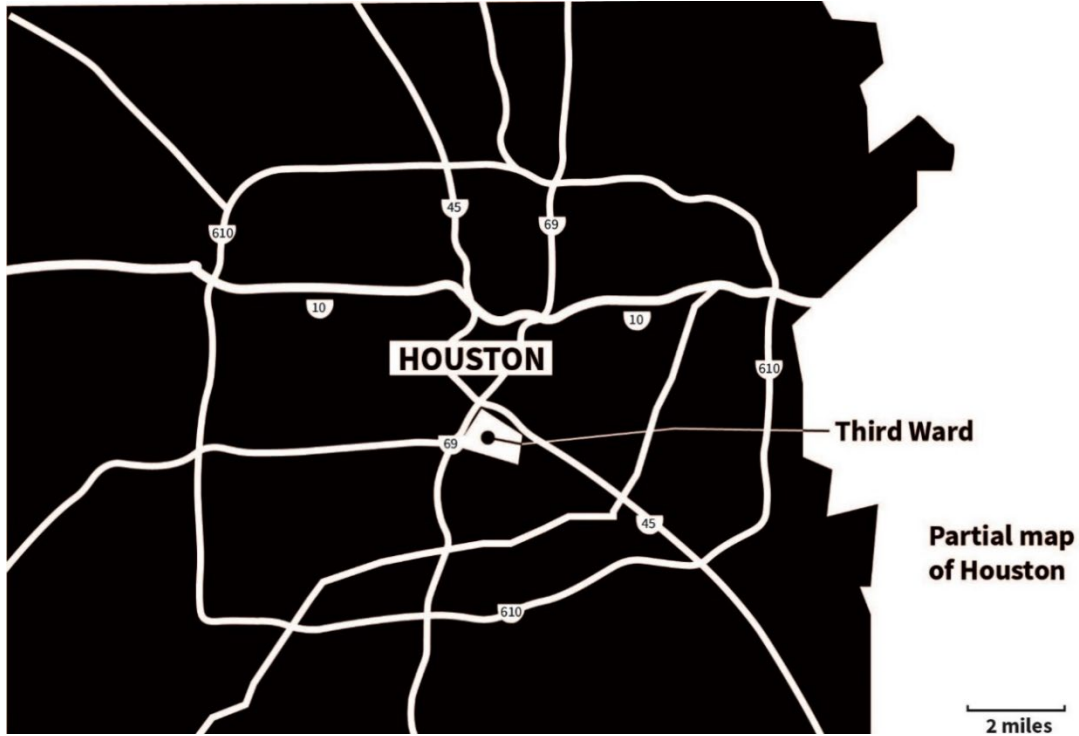
District, hailed as Houston’s Innovation Community, is underway.<sup>9</sup> This accelerated economic development affects the Third Ward, one of the city’s most famous (and vulnerable) communities. The new Ion District is near the Museum of African American Culture and the Buffalo Soldiers Museum. Across Highway 65 and located in Midtown, the Ion District is less than a mile from the Project Row Houses. In 2021, there was community uproar over the new Ion District over fears of gentrification, which translated to a concern of displacement and exclusion of existing low-income residents of the Third Ward.<sup>10</sup> Because of the Third Ward’s close proximity to Downtown (Figure 3) and direct connection to highways, the area is considered a prime location and vulnerable to rapid redevelopment.

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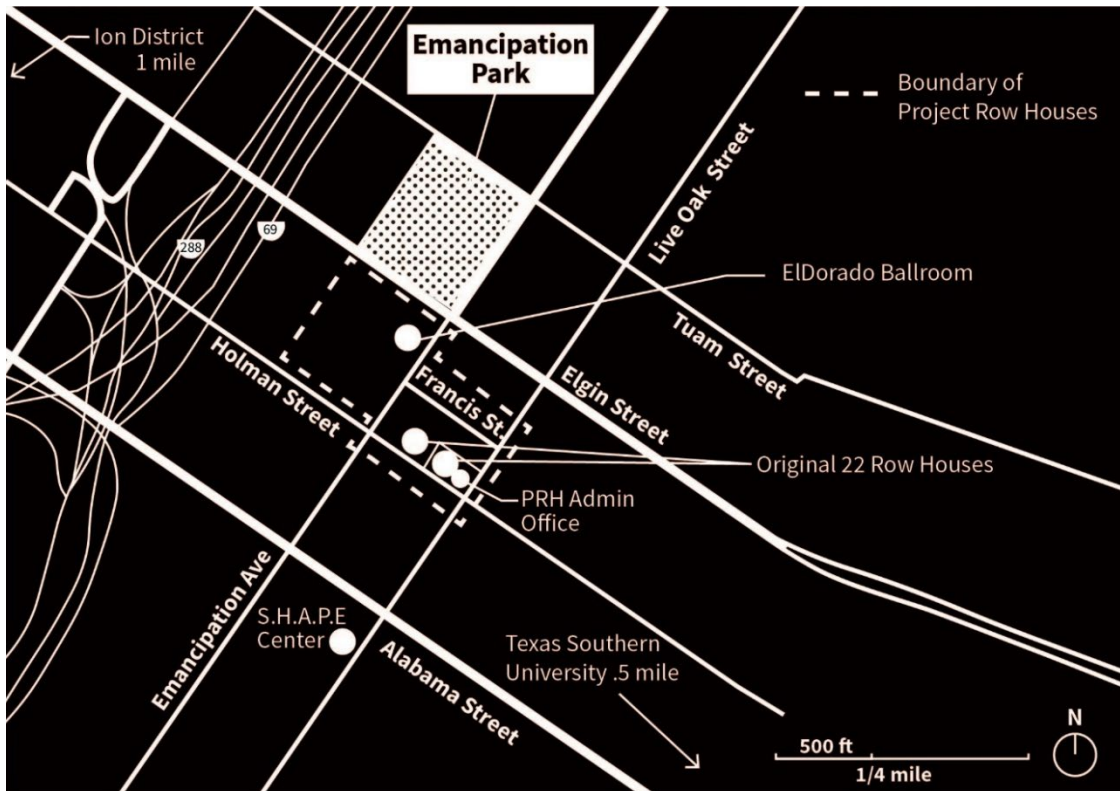
<sup>9</sup> The Ion, “Home,” <https://www.ionhouston.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> The Houston Coalition for Equitable Development Without Displacement, along with other neighborhood groups, vowed to disrupt meetings with the developer, Rice Management Company (the asset management arm of Rice University), until a community benefits agreement was signed. For more information see <https://www.houstoncba.org/> and Martin (2021).





**Figure 3** Partial map of Houston, TX showing the proximity of the Third Ward to downtown.



**Figure 4** Diagram of the Third Ward and Project Row Houses

## **The Third Ward**

In 1872, the Reverend Jack Yates, along with other influential members of the African American community, was able to purchase four acres of land in the Third Ward that would become Emancipation Park, the location of annual Juneteenth celebrations marking when the last of the enslaved were notified of their freedom in 1865 (Rhodes 2020). During that time, the Third Ward was segregated but demographically split between Black and White residents. However, the rest of the Third Ward evolved into a primarily African American community in the late 1930s. Emancipation Park was donated to the City of Houston in 1916, and for more than twenty years, it was the only public park in Houston open to African Americans.<sup>11</sup> Emancipation Park underwent a \$33.6 million-dollar renovation in 2017 (Perkins & Will 2017). The Third Ward is the location of the historically Black university Texas Southern and of the performance venue the Eldorado Ballroom (Figure 4).

The Third Ward, like many African American neighborhoods during that time, was described as close-knit, most likely out of necessity and cultural mores. Jerome Washington, a former Third Ward Resident and interviewee from the Andrew Garrison film *ThirdWardTX: A Documentary about Art, Life and Real Estate* stated fondly, “You didn’t need no fences. You didn’t need no keys. You know you didn’t need to worry about anybody breaking in your house. Because everybody up here knew everybody. Like Richard Pryor say [sic] this is a neighborhood, not a residential district. Yeah. What’s the old African proverb? It takes a village to raise a child. Well, this is what they had in here” (Garrison 2011).

There is evidence that collective spirit remains. An October 2019 joint report from Rice University’s Center for Health and Biosciences and the Sankofa Institute revealed that “Collective efficacy, which measures individuals’ willingness to help one another in times of need, was notably high across the Third Ward. Individuals were also willing to find ways to support the neighborhood through formal associations. The percentage of residents that participated in a neighborhood association, resident council, or a civic group exceeded national trends” (Moore, Richards, and Kulesza 2019, 7). The report was based on door-to-door survey data collected from over 1,600 heads of households (a 49 percent response rate) during three phases from April 2017 to August 2018.

Though the history of the Third Ward is rich, the population has its obstacles. According to the Housing Affordability metric 2014-2018 ACS data, approximately 47.5 percent of all rental households in

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<sup>11</sup> “Super Neighborhood 67 - Greater Third Ward,” [www.houstontx.gov](https://www.houstontx.gov/superneighborhoods/67.html), <https://www.houstontx.gov/superneighborhoods/67.html>.



the census tract spent more than 30 percent of their income on rent, the same rate as for the city of Houston (Brannen 2023). Of households without mortgages 46.8 percent spent more than 30 percent of their income on housing,<sup>12</sup> which could indicate that those who are older and own their homes are cost-burdened.

According to Census data, the Third Ward had 17,706 residents in 2020. From 2010 to 2020, the Third Ward saw its African American population drop almost 15 percent to just over eight thousand residents, although the overall population of the neighborhood grew 35 percent. White residents of the Third Ward increased from 1,283 to 3,465 during that time and now comprise about 20 percent of the population (Welch 2021). Some neighboring residents complain about being pushed out by gentrification (Gowdy 2021). The Third Ward had a higher probability of gentrifying than any other Houston neighborhood (Choudary, Wu, and Zhang 2018), causing residents to feel uneasy about the potential for rising housing costs, encroachment from new developments, possible displacement, and changing of the community (Binkovitz 2016). Yet talk of neighborhood gentrification has been present since at least 2006 (Kimmelman 2006) and prior.

To combat this gentrification, Project Row Houses organized the Emancipation Economic Development Council (EEDC). Formed in 2015,<sup>13</sup> the EEDC is a coalition of Third Ward religious, cultural, and business organizations that work to ensure equitable development focusing on the area's African American culture and history. The EEDC tagline is "Protect, Preserve, and Revitalize the Third Ward."

In 2017, Mayor Sylvester Turner and Houston's Planning and Development Department created a Complete Communities Action Plan, an effort to offer actionable solutions targeted at five Houston neighborhoods that had experienced disinvestment and neglect, with the goal of ten plans in ten neighborhoods over five years. This plan incorporated feedback from religious leaders and community activists, business owners, school representatives, and nonprofit organizations to provide sustainable, safe, and healthy communities with affordable housing, quality schools, updated infrastructure, streetscapes, and public art.<sup>14</sup> The report was released in 2018. The EEDC, along with other community groups, contributed to this effort by referencing previous policy reports and neighborhood studies that it had created. Goals outlined for the Third Ward were increasing the median household income (from

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<sup>12</sup> City of Houston, "Domestic Violence and Social Vulnerability Maps," <https://mycity.houstontx.gov/myrsvi/cohSVImapping.html>.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://emancipationhouston.org/about>.

<sup>14</sup> City of Houston, "Third Ward Complete Communities Action Plan," [https://houstoncc.org/our\\_communities/third\\_ward/index.php](https://houstoncc.org/our_communities/third_ward/index.php).

\$24,000 to \$46,000); reducing unemployment from 15 percent to 4 percent to match the Houston unemployment rate by supplying local opportunities for employment; growing the local economy by creating mixed-use development; supporting community-owned new businesses and adding pop-up spaces for new business; improving access to healthcare; building housing for all (as defined by creating a community land trust); incentivizing affordable housing in market-rate development; building more affordable owner-occupied and rental housing, and protecting residents from displacement.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, there was a strong push to preserve the neighborhood's history and character.

A 2019 study was performed jointly by Rice University's Center for Health and Bioscience and the Sankofa Institute. The Sankofa Institute is headed by Assata Richards, Ph.D., who is a Young Mothers Residential Program-Project Row Houses alum. The research team included community residents who often went door to door in the Third Ward to collect data. The total sample size of participants was 1,616. The study revealed that of 1,573 who answered questions about income, more than 66 percent had an income of less than \$20,000 per year (Moore, Richards, and Kulesza 2019, 12). Most of the 1,603 residents who answered questions on housing rented (81.84 percent), while 16.92 percent owned their homes (there was a small percentage that reported neither owning nor renting) (Moore, Richards, and Kulesza 2019, 14). Of 1,515 residents, 23.5 percent lived in what was considered inadequate housing, described as having one or more of the following characteristics: no heat or hot water, no air conditioning, exposed wiring, non-flushing toilets (Moore, Richards, and Kulesza 2019, 15). Rising rental costs and the new townhouses built in the area were the primary reasons respondents were concerned about having to relocate from the Third Ward. An overwhelming majority of the residents (63.52 percent of 1,609 respondents) reported being extremely worried about the potential loss of African American culture in the neighborhood in the last twelve months. This is understandable: according to the Census of 2000 to 2010 the population of White residents went from 9 percent to 11 percent but was projected to jump significantly (according to ACS 5-year survey) to 28 percent in 2015 (from the Third Ward Complete Community Data Snapshot, July 2018<sup>16</sup>).

Furthermore, the Third Ward faces many health challenges, even after 30 years of Project Row Houses. Of course, health outcomes have many causes, including economic, social, environmental, and biological factors. According to the Rice University-Sankofa Institute study, the neighborhood

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Houston Complete Communities, Data, Statistics and Maps, [https://houstoncc.org/our\\_communities/third\\_ward/data\\_statistics\\_and\\_maps.php](https://houstoncc.org/our_communities/third_ward/data_statistics_and_maps.php).

experienced a higher rate of diabetes, approximately 14.3 percent, than the national average of 9.4 percent. Additionally, the prevalence of hypertension was 36.8 percent, slightly surpassing the national average of 33 percent. Heart issues were on par with the national average of 9 percent (Moore, Richards, and Kulesza 2019). The neighborhood also exhibited significantly higher rates of depression, at 16.7 percent, than the national average of 6.8 percent, while anxiety rates, at 17.0 percent, were slightly lower than the national average of 19.1 percent (Moore, Richards, and Kulesza 2019).

The 2021 Houston State of Health Mental Health index serves as a measure of socioeconomic and health factors associated with self-reported poor mental health. Data specific to the 77004-zip code revealed a score of 89.1 (out of 100), indicating a high demand for mental health services. The census tract encompassing Project Row Houses received a score of 97.4.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that a study conducted by Rice University and Sankofa found correlation between participants' residing in severely inadequate housing and their reporting worse physical and mental health conditions (Moore, Richards, and Kulesza 2019, 54 and 56).

## **Rick Lowe, the Artist, and the Inception of Project Row Houses**

Born in Eufaula, Alabama, Rick Lowe was trained as a visual artist at Columbus College in Georgia and moved to Houston in 1985.<sup>18</sup> Once he moved to Houston, he co-founded various artist collectives and unions, was a part of exhibits at contemporary art museums, and was a part of The Third Ward's S.H.A.P.E Center.<sup>19</sup> Lowe spent time under the tutelage of artist Dr. John T. Biggers, who founded the art department at nearby Texas Southern University and often depicted the beauty and cultural relevance of row houses in his work.

Before the inception of PRH, some of Lowe's work focused on police and racist violence and other societal ills.<sup>20</sup> However, he was called to rethink his practice in 1990 when a group of high school students visited his studio, and one asked a particularly pointed question:

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<sup>17</sup> Houston State of Health, "Mental Health Index," <https://www.houstonstateofhealth.com/indexsuite/index/mentalhealth>.

<sup>18</sup> Rick Lowe, official website, <https://www.ricklowe.com/>.

<sup>19</sup> A Pan-African community center that, at the time of this writing, is still based in the Third Ward. The author had lunch there during the PRH site visit. S.H.A.P.E stands for Self Help for African People through Education (Finkelpearl 2013, 135). S.H.A.P.E. is down the street from Project Row Houses. See site map.

<sup>20</sup> Gagosian, "Rick Lowe," <https://gagosian.com/artists/rick-lowel/>.

I was doing big, billboard-size paintings and cutout sculptures dealing with social issues, and one of the students told me that, sure, the work reflected what was going on in his community, but it wasn't what the community needed. If I was an artist, he said, why didn't I come up with some kind of creative solution to issues instead of just telling people like him what they already knew? That was the defining moment that pushed me out of the studio. (Lowe, quoted in Kimmelman 2006).

While still participating in art exhibitions for established museums, Lowe hinted at the urge to promote art, community, and accessibility. As he noted in 1993, “My goal is to create works and put them in a place that’s accessible to everyone, somewhere where people don’t have to dress up, pay admission, or be on their best behavior.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1993, Project Row Houses (PRH), influenced both by artist Joseph Beuys's idea of “social sculpture” (Dennis 2018, 7) and by Dr. John T. Biggers, was established by Rick Lowe, Bert Long, Bert Samples, Jesse Lott, Floyd Newsum, James Bettison, and George Smith, lovingly referred to locally as “The Magnificent Seven” (Figure 5). Part of the idea of “social sculpture” was the mission of creating program with community, like a “call and response.”<sup>22</sup>

Born in 1943 and lovingly referred to by the community as “Brother Jesse,” Jesse Lott recalled that the origin of the Magnificent Seven’s partnership was strategic, even though they all had different individual motivations.<sup>23</sup> In his interview with Eureka Gilkey, he remembers what is known around PRH founding folklore as the Splendor Summit Weekend: “We all went to Splendor to try to formulate some kind of unified action. How do we promote revolutionary change?... Art was the primary tool to make revolutionary change” (PRH All Real Radio 2023).

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<sup>21</sup> The Arizona Republic, 11, August 17, 1993.

<sup>22</sup> PRH staff Interview, August 24, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Eureka Gilkey, Executive Director of PRH, during a streamed Interview with Jesse Lott asked about the origins of Project Row Houses: “What was the block like? The neighborhood? What prompted ya’ll to come together in this way?” Jesse Lott responded, “Bert Long lived in Splendor. He was doing fine, but some of his not so famous neighbors wanted to be anonymous. They let him know ‘This is our country. Not your country.’ He had a nice big Cadillac and the Klan came and marked it up. We had a group of friends who were all trying to make inroads into the arts establishment. It was almost impossible to get your work shown. It was hard to get representatives. Even the education system wasn’t working for us. In fact, Dr. Biggers had a show at the Museum of Fine Arts (Houston) and they wouldn’t let him in the front door because no one believed he was the artist. He had to go around the back door, and the janitor found someone to let him in, so he went in through the back door.” PRH All Real Radio (2023).



**Figure 5** The Magnificent Seven (from left to right) George Smith, Bert Long, Rick Lowe, Bert Samples (seated), James Bettison (in framed photo), Jesse Lott, and Floyd Newsum. Photo courtesy of Project Row Houses.

In the same interview he described the groups purchase of the original twenty-two houses:

When this group of houses was first discovered, of course, Rick ran up on them, we had two or three meetings on what to do and what the objective was going to be. He was at Texas Southern at the time. These houses were up for sale or demolition. We had a meeting over Jim's house and [presumably Rick] said "I seen these houses that look just like Dr. Bigger's drawings. That could be something." US Homes was having a national sale. The houses were up for sale and they would pay you a certain amount of money to tear it down. Ricky went to Austin. He ain't no dummy. He did some research and found out that the houses were old enough for historical designation. If we got that we wouldn't have to tear them down. We can fix them up...

Dr. Chu's daddy was living in Singapore at the time. His son was Lynn Chu [Dr. Chu]. He was living in the two-story [the building that now houses PRH Administrative offices]. One night someone came in there and killed him..<sup>24</sup> So, the old man [Dr. Chu's father] didn't want to return [to the United States], so the old man didn't want the property anymore. So, he was ok to sell. He [presumably Rick] had two deals going ... when the historical designation came in, we said we could. (PRH All Real Radio 2023)

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<sup>24</sup> Dr. Chu (assumed spelling). I looked for information on this murder or Dr. Chu's personal history but found no results.





**Figure 6** The original Row Houses prior to restoration. Photo by Sheryl Tucker Vasquez  
Courtesy of Project Row Houses

Since establishing Project Row Houses with his cohort, the Magnificent Seven, Lowe has become a highly awarded artist and civic leader. He was a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 2002<sup>25</sup> and won the Creative Time Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change in 2010.<sup>26</sup> He was part of the Venice Architecture Biennale, President Barack Obama appointed him to the National Council on the Arts in 2013 (Sewing 2016), and in 2014 he was named a MacArthur Fellow.<sup>27</sup> Lowe has also been involved in art programs outside of Houston in neighborhoods needing revitalization: “He has continued such community-based art programs with Greenwood Art Project in Tulsa, Oklahoma (2018–21) and Black Wall Street Journey (2021–) in Chicago, for which he worked with local artists and residents to raise awareness of issues of migration, wealth creation, and the destruction of community around the 1921

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<sup>25</sup> The Loeb Fellowship, “Rick Lowe,” 2002, <https://loebfellowshigsd.harvard.edu/fellows-alumni/fellows-search/rick-lowel/>.

<sup>26</sup> Creativetime.org, “Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change - Creative Time,” n.d. <https://creativetime.org/summit/prize/#past>.

<sup>27</sup> MacArthur Foundation, “Rick Lowe,” September 14, 2014, <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2014/rick-lowel/>

Tulsa Race Massacre.”<sup>28</sup> He has also spearheaded other smaller neighborhood community development efforts in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California and in North Dallas, Texas.<sup>29</sup>

Since stepping down from executive leadership with Project Row Houses in 2018, Lowe has resumed his individual art practice, still integrating ideas of social sculpture, land use, economic disparity, and spatial agency in his work (Figure 7). During his tenure at Project Row Houses, Lowe was also personally invested in individuals of the Third Ward and giving people second chances. Virginia Billeaud Anderson of *Intown Magazine* interviewed Lowe and recalls the tale of “Brother-in-Law”:

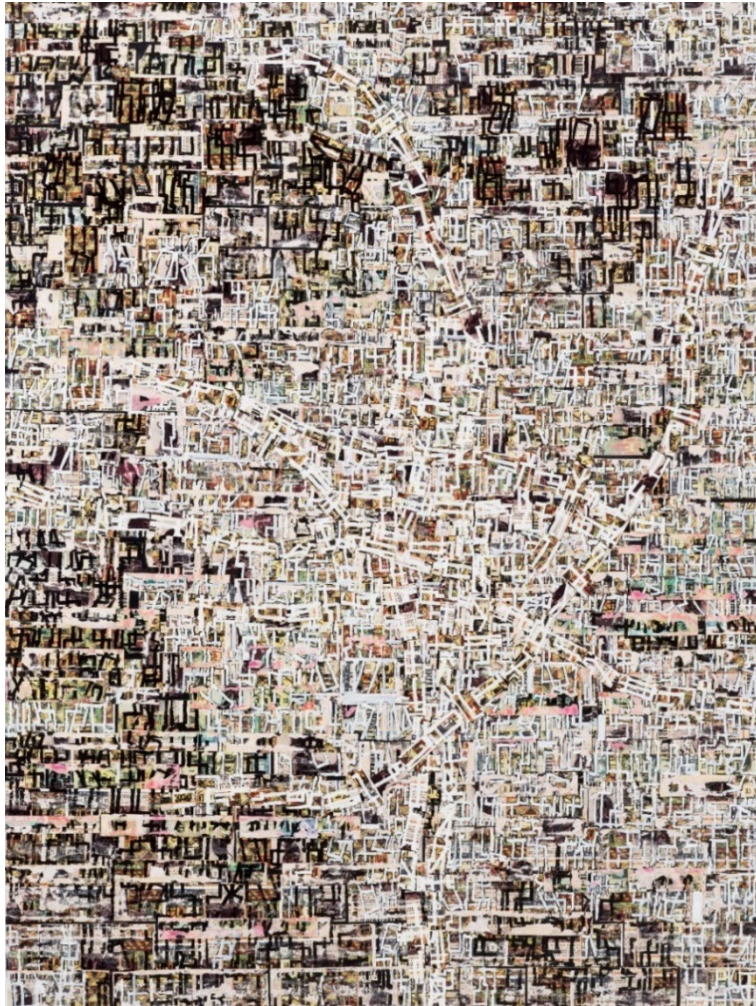
I was taken with the photo “Brother-in-Law” of a spiffed-up dude holding a plate of grilled chicken and mentioned it in a newspaper article. I assumed at the time his subject was a popular restaurateur but learned later he had returned to Third Ward after serving over twenty years in prison. His pre-prison dream was to own a restaurant, so Lowe staged him like he lived his dream. Mirroring the row houses’ shift from connotations of blight to positive symbols, he said he re-branded the guy into a positive symbol. (Anderson 2020)

As revealed to me in a later interview by the past Project Manager of the Row House Community Development Corporation, for years Brother-in-Law ran a successful small barbeque business in the Third Ward.

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<sup>28</sup> Rick Lowe, official website, <https://www.ricklowe.com/>.

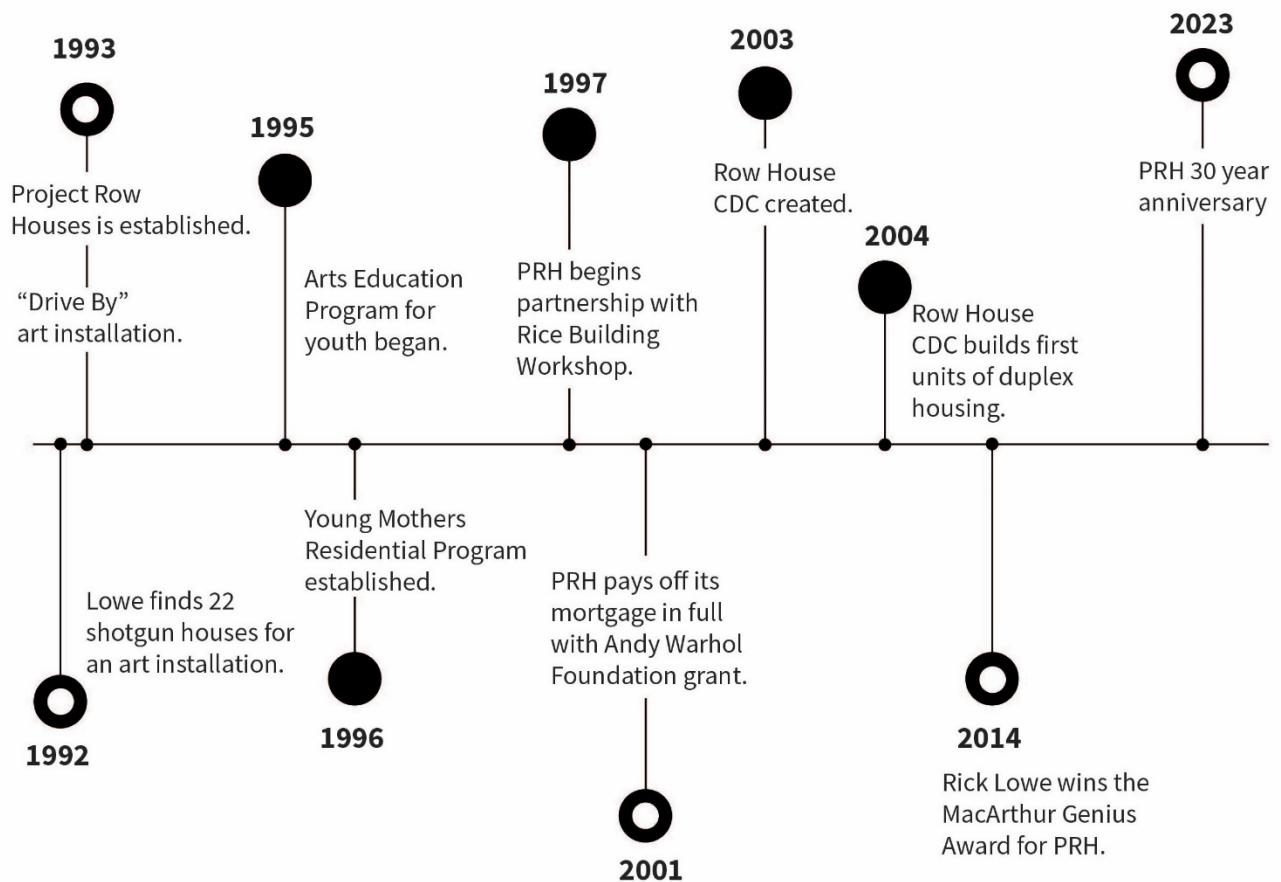
<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 7** Rick Lowe, *Project Row Houses: Bigger and Beuys*, 2021, Acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 96 x 72 inches (243.8 x 182.9 cm) © Rick Lowe Studio. Photo: Thomas Dubrock. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian.



## Project Row Houses Organizational Timeline



**Figure 8** Project Row Houses Development and Organizational Timeline<sup>30</sup>

### Why Was This Area Selected for the Intervention?

When Lowe identified the shotgun houses and wanted to acquire them, he realized that this undertaking could not be an effort just limited to the seven artists; he began spreading the word and “planting the seed and telling people what the possibilities were” (Finkelpearl 2013, 135). The first major partnership was in 1993 with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) under the request of DiverseWorks, an artist organization that Lowe belonged to at the time. Once the original owner received a letter from Lowe and the NEA stating that they were interested in renovating the houses, he

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<sup>30</sup> Timeline of significant dates from the Project Row Houses, “2017-2018 Impact Report: 25 Years of Progress,” from the collection of Aisha Densmore-Bey, collected during site visit, August 2022.

was interested in selling and a lease-purchase agreement was developed (Finkelpearl 2013). This lease-purchase agreement was for five years, starting in 1993.<sup>31</sup> They purchased the original 22 houses for \$32,000 (Goldberg 1995 and interview with a former PRH Director).

There are different recollections around the origin of the sale of the original row houses and where the original owner was located. A past PRH Director said the owner was Vietnamese, Jesse Lott says the owner was living in Singapore, and in Rick Lowe's interview in Finkelpearl's book, he said the owner was an architect living in Taiwan. Differing recollections aside, the owner sold to the group.

During its inception, residents seemed delighted that the neighborhood would be receiving an arts development project to restore the decrepit shotgun houses on Holman Street. One community member described the project as "like a blood transfusion. It has given life to the community" (Goldberg 1995). The Third Ward was the epicenter of African American life and culture in Houston, and it had suffered a great decline due to the community's being flooded with drugs and an increase in crime.

The restoration of the 22 houses designated as part of the project was not just a community or city-wide but a national effort:

The National Endowment for the Arts gave \$25,000 in seed money (for the original purchase). Amoco offered its employees around the country a day off to go to Houston and help, and Chevron followed suit. Home Depot pitched in with materials. The city's museums and nonprofit galleries sent curators, carpenters and electricians. The sheriff sent nonviolent juvenile offenders to work off their fines, and Houston residents turned out in force. Heaps of trash and piles of used needles were cleared away, and all 22 of the houses were fully or partly restored for the art exhibition and studio space, an office, permanent and temporary housing for artists and the various educational programs. (Goldberg 1995)

Jesse Lott's interview with Eureka Gilkey revealed additional funding sources in the acquisition of the original 22 houses:

Isaac Heimbinder. Isaac Heimbinder funded the acquisition of the place.<sup>32</sup> Next thing you know he blocked off the street and had a big ol' movie about Dr. Biggers and the evolution of the Shotgun house.

The city had mandated that once the houses were purchased and transferred to different ownership, they had to be made safe. So, each door and window, they had to be sealed over. But someone wanted to do an exhibition. So how do you do an exhibition. You do it on the outside. (PRH All Real Radio 2023)

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> The Heimbinder Family Foundation funded the properties, according to an acquisition document (General Warranty Deed with Vendors Lien In Appendix).

Jesse Lott gave the idea for the first exhibition or “Artist Round” at PRH called “The Drive-By.” In 1993 the land around the houses had been cleared, but the structures themselves were still raw and the openings had to be covered. The Magnificent Seven gathered nine important African American artists from around Texas<sup>33</sup> and created artwork to be displayed on the exterior of the houses (Figures 9 and 10).



**Figure 9** The first exhibition or “Round” at PRH. “The Drive-By,” conceived by Jesse Lott, 1993. Courtesy of Project Row Houses

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<sup>33</sup> Project Row Houses, “Art Programs” pamphlet, from the collection of Aisha Densmore-Bey, collected during site visit, August 2022.



**Figure 10** Drive-by Exhibit at PRH - Installation of Image by Israel McCloud, 1993. Courtesy of Project Row Houses.

When Jesse Lott was asked about his relationship with John Biggers, he explained the following: “We siting up in one of his drawings right now! All he used to do was draw houses. He built a lot of his compositions around shotgun houses... I was never a student of Dr. Biggers at Texas Southern, in 1958 is when I met Dr. Biggers. He was a storyteller, but a teacher above all. Every time you saw him it was a lesson...I kinda miss him. But the information is still there” (PRH All Real Radio 2023).

## Early Supporters and Press Coverage

Additional early supporters of Project Row Houses included The Kinder Foundation, The Chevron Corporation, and The Menil Foundation, of which Lowe later was on the board of Trustees (Menil Collection Annual Report 2013-2017).

Yet in the early days PRH faced some obstacles. It was reported in the local media that one employee embezzled \$200,000 from the organization (Johnson 2006). Initial press wasn't all flattering and sometimes tone-deaf, short-sighted, and bordering on racist. In the early days of Project Row Houses' establishment, Deborah Grotfeldt was its managing director and, as Vicki Goldberg so thoughtlessly wrote in the *New York Times*, "the only White on the staff" (Goldberg 1995). Even worse, Goldberg states that Grotfeldt's "short, stand-up bleached-blond hair and pale blue eyes, coupled with Mr. Lowe's unruly dreadlocks, lend the project a credible air of diversity" (Figure 13), which illustrates how the people behind the project were covered by some members of the press. Two additional obtuse questions posed by the article were "Does art plunked down into minority neighborhoods cater to White connoisseurs alone? And can it really be useful to people in an impoverished inner-city neighborhood?" Viewing art's validity through a White lens while questioning if it can be useful to those without financial means implies the purely human trait of appreciating creativity can be valued only by the wealthy. As Goldberg wrote in her 1995 article "In Houston, Rebuilding by Creating," "How much lasting effect all this will have on the poverty-stricken neighborhood remains to be seen, but the beginnings are promising" (Goldberg 1995).





**Figure 11** Rick Lowe and Deborah Grotfeldt, original managing director of Project Row Houses, taken during filming of *Third Ward TX* (2007). Photo courtesy of Nancy Bless.

In 1996, after some research, PRH found that approximately 70 percent of the children born in the community were born to single parents, primarily single mothers. A challenge for single mothers was housing insecurity. This led to the Young Mothers in Residence Program (YMRP), which used five of the original 22 houses for the program. Occupants could live rent-free for one year. They had curfews, had to continue their education, and they were matched with some level of employment.<sup>34</sup> Assata-Nicole Richards was one resident:

I spent approximately eighteen months in the YMRP. During this time, I finished the AmeriCorps program and returned to the University of Houston as a freshman on the scholarship that I earned. I graduated with honors in the summer of 1998 with a full fellowship...at Pennsylvania State University, where I earned my Ph.D. in 2004, and accepted a tenure track position at the University of Pittsburgh. The impact of the YMRP on my life is profoundly apparent...when I returned to the University of Houston, I did so as an affirmation of my value and potential, a belief the YMRP seeded within me. (Dennis 2018, 30)

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with a former PRH Director, October 18, 2022.

Between 1997-2018, there were over seventy participants in the Young Mothers Residential Program (Dennis 2018, 110-11) and over one hundred participants total. As of 2022, the YMRP has been sunsetted, and housing services are now operating through the PRH Financial, Artistic, Career & Empowerment Center (F.A.C.E) program, which will be discussed later in this report.

A grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation helped PRH pay off its mortgage in 2001.<sup>35</sup>

### **Row House Community Development Corporation and PRH Preservation**

The Row House CDC (which manages affordable housing creation) and PRH Preservation are sister organizations of Project Row Houses. After establishing the Young Mothers Residential Program, PRH realized that after the one-year tenure in the program, many mothers needed housing after they transitioned out of the YMRP. In 1997, PRH began a partnership with the Rice University architecture school's Building Workshop (RBW).

This collaboration resulted in a student design/build housing prototype called "The Six-Square House" that replicated the existing shotgun houses in the Third Ward. The RBW completed additional construction drawings for more iterations of housing in 1998, but the plans laid dormant for years. In 2003, the Row House CDC was formed to develop housing, but they realized they had no one on staff to manage the building of the homes. A former staff member told an amusing story of how their unconventional interview resulted in their joining the organization. Around 2003 they interviewed Deborah Grotfeldt directly after playing dominoes in the PRH offices with some of the neighborhood's residents (one of which was the aforementioned "Brother-in-Law"), who were on site. Grotfeldt hired them on the spot and their title was "Project Manager." After joining PRH they helped start the nonprofit for affordable housing (Row House CDC).<sup>36</sup> The CDC consisted of themselves and Grotfeldt, equipped with Rice University drawings from 1998. The new CDC was responsible for duplex houses. Eight units were built on Division Street directly behind PRH. The units were the first new affordable housing in the Third Ward in twenty years. Fannie Mae, the City of Houston, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Dallas, and Whitney Bank supported the CDC's first affordable housing developments (Bobb 2004).

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<sup>35</sup> Project Row Houses, "2017-2018 Impact Report: 25 Years of Progress," from the collection of Aisha Densmore-Bey, obtained during a site visit, August 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with a former PRH Director, October 18, 2022.

Once the duplexes were occupied, a residents' council was established that looked at community cleanup, but it was also a community that watched over the neighborhood children. The former staff member I interviewed was at PRH for about four years, their first-year fundraising and vetting for contractors. In 2004, Grotfeldt left the organization, and they became Executive Director. They left PRH CDC in 2007. The organization mourned Deborah Grotfeldt's passing on September 30, 2022.<sup>37</sup>

In 2008 eight additional duplex houses (Figure 14) were designed by the Rice Building Workshop and built on Francis Street. There have been six additional housing developments built since 2008. The Row House CDC provides over 70 low to moderate-income housing units in the Third Ward. As of 2022, Row House CDC is headed by Libby Viera-Bland, but the housing is managed by CES Management, a Black-owned property management firm that focuses on "underperforming" multi-unit housing renovations. PRH Preservation was established in 2018 as a response to the many abandoned and run-down properties in the neighborhood.



**Figure 12** Duplex homes on Francis Street. Photo by the author.

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<sup>37</sup> PRH (@projectrowhouses) Instagram, October 5, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjWRkCLOHhf/>.



## **2022-2023 Organizational Structure, Income, Operating Budget and Programming**

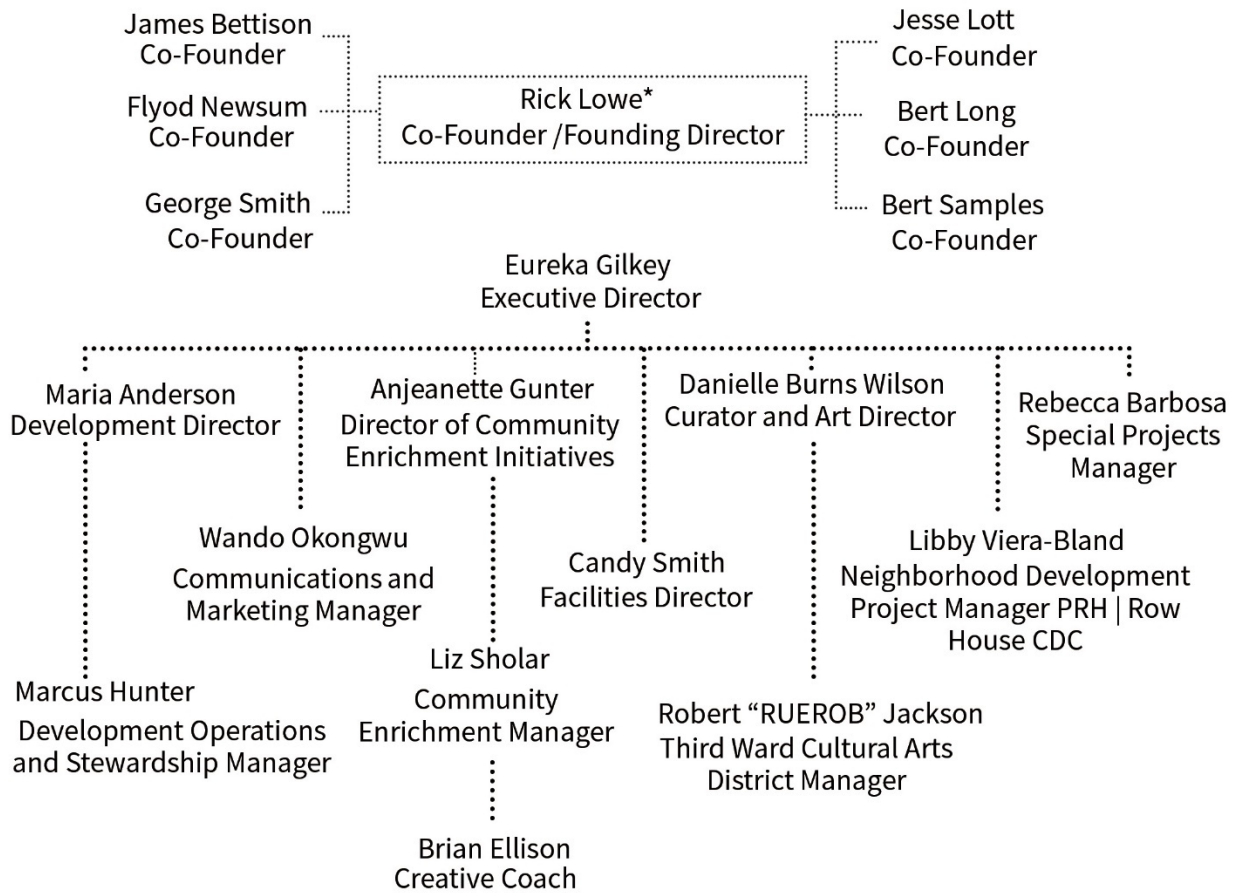
As of 2023, there are 23 staff members of Project Row Houses (Figure 15). According to the 2012-2020 years of 990 tax forms, Project Row Houses revenue seems to average around \$1.5 million per year, with two years being exceptional with a revenue of over three million each year, although one year the organization had a surplus and the next a deficit (Figure 17 and Table 2). Continuing financial support for Project Row Houses comes from public donations and grants. A partial listing of PRH supporters, derived from their website, is below (Figure 16). Additional funders have also played important roles. Houston native and Grammy-Award-winning singer and artist Solange donated her \$100,000 award for Artists Creating Social Impact to Project Row Houses in 2019 (Díaz 2019). The National Endowment for the Arts “Our Town” program gave a grant to PRH for fiscal year 2021 in the amount of \$100,000 to support artist residencies focused on financial literacy and career counseling.<sup>38</sup> PRH received \$50,000 from the Houston Texans (a football team) Inspire Change Grant Fund to install heating and air conditioning in the exhibition houses, so that they can be used year-round.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, “FY21, FY20, FY19 Our Town Grantees,” <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Recent-Our-Town-Awards-5.17.22.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> PRH (@projectrowhouses) Instagram post, January 4, 2023- [https://www.instagram.com/p/CnAz\\_pMpZ/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CnAz_pMpZ/)

**Project Row Houses Organizational Chart (abbreviated)**

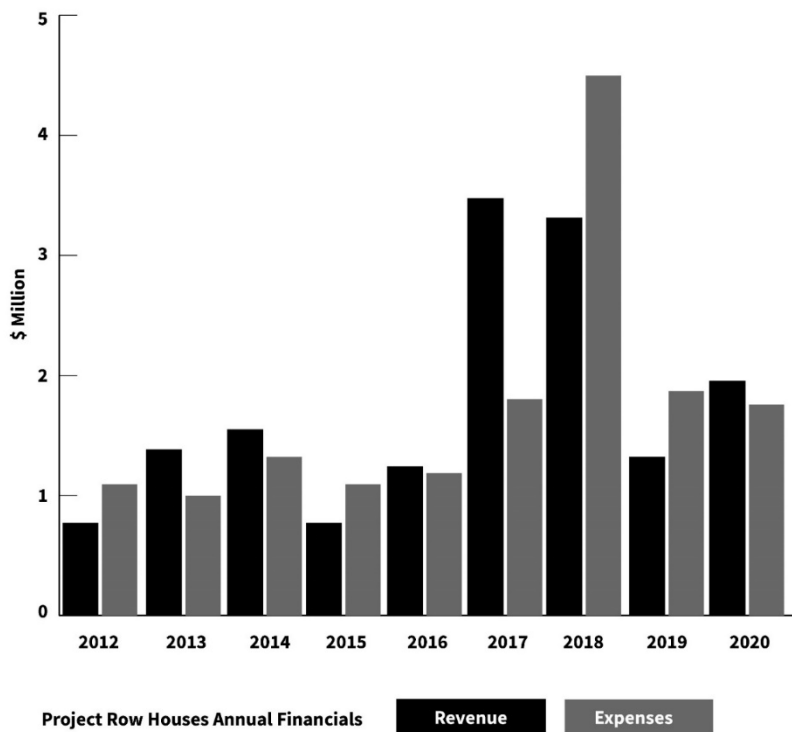


\*No longer involved with the daily operations of PRH.  
 \*\*Some names and titles not listed for clarity and brevity.

**Figure 13** Project Row Houses Organizational Chart (as of 2023). Docents and other members of PRH were left off this chart for brevity.

Project Row Houses	Donors*
	BBVA Foundation; The Brown Foundation; James V. Derrick and Carrin Patman; John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; The Elkins Foundation; First Unitarian Universalist Church; <b>The Ford Foundation</b> ; Goethe Pop Up Houston, Greater Houston Community Foundation; The Jacob & Terese Hershey Foundation; Houston Endowment Inc.; Houck Family Foundation; Sis and Hasty Johnson; <b>The Kinder Foundation</b> ; <b>The Kresge Foundation</b> ; The Lewis Family Foundation; Local Initiative Support Corporation; John P. McGovern Foundation; <b>the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation</b> ; Mid-America Arts Alliance; MUFG Union Bank Foundation, <b>National Endowment for the Arts</b> ; Picnic; The Alice Kleberg Reynolds Foundation; Rockwell Fund; Mackenzie Scott and Dan Jewett; Silicon Valley Community Foundation; Stanley Black & Decker, Texas Commission on the Arts; 2020 Don Tyson Prize; <b>The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts</b> ; Joan Hohlt & Roger Wich Foundation; and grants from the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.
	via Project Row Houses- <a href="https://projectrowhouses.org/about/">https://projectrowhouses.org/about/</a>

**Figure 14** Partial listing of Project Row Houses financial donors and support (as of 2023).



**Figure 15** Project Row Houses Annual Revenue and Expenses Graph

	Revenue	Expenses	Surplus/Loss
2011	\$1,356,598	\$877,583	+ \$479,015
2012	\$771,293	\$1,068,849	- \$297,556
2013	\$1,419,994	\$1,087,866	+ \$332,128
2014	\$1,557,798	\$1,224,561	+ \$333,237
2015	\$865,507	\$1,190,495	- \$324,988
2016	\$1,218,298	\$1,198,435	+ \$19,863
2017	\$3,574,510	\$1,745,667	+ \$1,828,843
2018	\$3,337,816	\$4,440,425	- \$1,102,609
2019	\$1,289,934	\$1,878,259	- \$588,325
2020	\$1,954,244	\$1,771,932	+ \$182,312

**Project Row Houses Annual Financials Overview**

All financial information for Project Row Houses derived from Pro Publica

**Table 2** Project Row Houses Annual Revenue and Expenses<sup>40</sup>

Project Row Houses has a three-part programming approach listed on their promotional materials that focuses on **Art, Community Enrichment,** and **Neighborhood Development** (Figure 18).

<sup>40</sup> ProPublica, “Project Row Houses,” <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/760411778>.



**Project Row Houses Three Part Programming Approach**

**Figure 16** Three Programming Pillars of Project Row Houses referred to as “Our Work”

**Art**

Project Row Houses has been engaged with and impactful to numerous artists of color. Noted artist Angelbert Metoyer was a Third Ward resident and prodigy of Project Row Houses in 1994 at seventeen years old. Angelbert was mentored by an artist in the early days of PRH and in 2020 his painting

“Daughters of the Thunder” sold at Sotheby’s for over \$27,000.<sup>41</sup> PRH also attracted many established creatives and brought their work to the community. Famed landscape architect and artist Walter Hood had an installation exhibition at Project Row Houses in 2001,<sup>42</sup> and writer bell hooks was a part of Artist Round 46 in 2017.<sup>43</sup> As of 2017 there were over 300 artists who have been involved with PRH, including Simone Leigh and Julie Mehretu.<sup>44</sup>

### ***The Public Art Program: Exhibits/Rounds and Residencies***

Beginning with the first Drive-By exhibition, PRH holds two artist rounds per year; these are semi-annual rounds where five homes are used for art exhibitions and installations. All of the rounds are curated by a certain theme. Round 47 was titled “The Act of Doing: Preserving, Revitalizing, and Protecting Third Ward,” curated by Ryan N. Dennis. Round 53, “The Curious Cast of Critical Race...Theory?,” was curated by Danielle Burns Wilson. Many artists from the Rounds choose to use their installations to highlight social issues like physical changes (gentrification) of the Third Ward (Figure 19) or the legislation over bodily autonomy. Summer Studios Residencies are another part of the art program. During the Summer Studios, young artists enrolled at local colleges and universities transform a house into an exhibit or studio. The installation “Domestic Supply of Commodified Bodies” by Tony Rincon and Liz Hayes (Figure 20) interrogates “the egregious inequalities that Black communities face when it comes to matters regarding Reproductive Justice,” with the red string in the piece symbolizing the barriers that women must navigate in this medical and legislative system.<sup>45</sup> During its Round 54, “Southern Survey Biennial,” PRH celebrated because the organization was able to give \$25,000 to round artist Rehab El Sadek.<sup>46</sup> In March of 2023, they were in their 55th series of Artist Rounds (some most likely were canceled due to the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020, which halted people from gathering until late 2021, in some cases 2022). In honor of their 30-year anniversary, the 55th Round was titled “Drive-By II,” with artists exhibiting work on the exteriors of the houses.

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<sup>41</sup> Sotheby’s, “Contemporary Art/Lot 567,” <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2020/contemporary-art/angelbert-metoyer-daughters-of-thunder-ancient>.

<sup>42</sup> Hood Design Studio, “PROJECT ROW HOUSE,” <https://www.hooddesignstudio.com/rowhouse>.

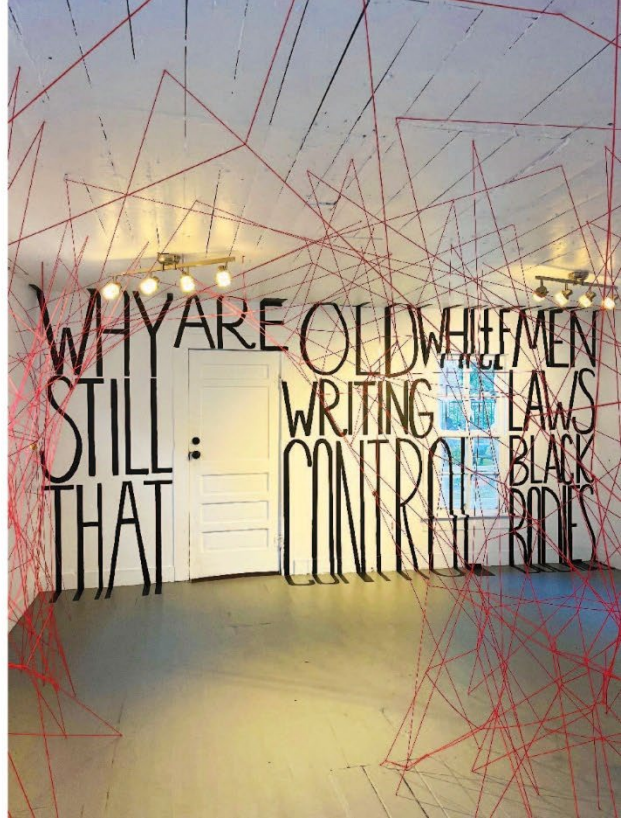
<sup>43</sup> Project Row Houses, “2017-2018 Impact Report,” 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>45</sup> Exhibit card, from the collection of Aisha Densmore-Bey, obtained during site visit, August 2022.

<sup>46</sup> PRH (@projectrowhouses) Instagram, November 17, 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfFLm0jrg9y/>.





(left) **Figure 17** Artist Unknown and (right) **Figure 18** Installation Tony Rincon & Liz Hayes. Photos by the author

### ***Artist Studios***

Brian Ellison is an artist/photographer and co-founder of The Blackman Project with a studio at PRH.

Artists in large cities often lack the resources to afford studio spaces. PRH offers affordable studios to artists in the community. Brian serves as Artist Creative Coach and is a resident of Project Row Houses.

In my interview with him he discussed the impact of the Rounds on his career:

Ryan Dennis, she gave me an opportunity that really changed the trajectory of my art. My capacity for what I thought I could create just changed. That Round happened [the Round he was able to participate in] and then I look up and I was at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. They asked me to premiere my film short there [“A Day in the Tre’: A Young Man’s Journey through His Rapidly Changing Neighborhood”]. Those opportunities happen because of the Ryan Dennises of the world and the PRH.

## **Community Enrichment**

In addition to art, community enrichment is one of the hallmark strategies of PRH. Anjeanette Gunter, Director of Community Enrichment Initiatives, as of 2022 has been at PRH for three years. The Community Enrichment initiatives are supported by the Financial Opportunity Center, a national program by the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC) launched in 2020. When Emancipation Park was renovated, there was also an outreach informing developers that the Third Ward was ripe for development. As Gunter states, even though they knew that “gentrification would be inevitable in the neighborhood,” the open call to developers accelerated its pace. The goal of the program was to combine efforts with affordable housing and create a program where “legacy residents”<sup>47</sup> (long-term residents of the neighborhood for at least fifteen years) could remain in the neighborhood through financial coaching, career coaching, and assistance with public benefits, behavioral health and wellness programs. During the launch, PRH added legal assistance programs, food distributions through partnerships, donation drives, etc. These programs are to assist residents coming through the Financial Opportunity Center. The Financial Opportunity Center has two main focuses: Artists/Creatives who are looking to start or expand their own business practices (Building Blocks of Creative Careers) and non-artists who are interested in traditional nine-to-five employment (F.A.C.E). A sample of thirty-one social media posts shows that some of PRH’s regular community programming include:

### **Financial, Artistic, Career, and Empowerment Program (F.A.C.E)**

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- Open Computer and Digital Literacy Labs
- Resume Writing virtual classes
- Estate Planning workshops
- Savings and Financial Literacy, Managing Debt, Basics of Investing, Borrowing Basics, Credit score and Reports, and Money Mindsets.
- Introduction to Grants for Artists and Creatives.

### **Building Blocks for Creative Careers**

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Anjeanette Gunter.



- Six sessions of “Ask an Art Lawyer”- Legal clinic for artists and creatives (April 27, 2022)
- **Artists’ Mixers** (Mentoring and Showcase Mixers)
- **Artist Coaching**

### **Small Business Incubation**

- **Small business incubation and meetups.** Project Row Houses established a creative business incubator program that has launched 8 small businesses in the Third Ward. Woman-owned bakery Crumbville, TX, bookstore Kindred Stories, and vegan coffee bar Doshi House are past participants.<sup>48</sup>
- **Emancipation Economic Development Council** (programs include Emancipation Avenue Main Street and small business training)

### **Community Support Services**

- **Medication Misuse and Management Virtual Seminars for Seniors:** Learning about how medications mix, how to navigate a prescription routine, and risk factors that come with aging. (March 3, 2022)
- **Resources for Aging Care Workshop,** offering healthcare and financial assistance for people over 65. (February 3, 2022)
- **Managing Grief and Loss**
- **Introduction to Mental Healthcare workshops**
- **Behavioral health workshops with a licensed clinical social worker** (bi-weekly)
- **Introduction to Yoga**
- **Monthly Art Therapy Sessions**

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<sup>48</sup> Project Row Houses, “Business Incubations,” <https://projectrowhouses.org/our-work/community-enrichment/business-incubations/>.

- **Ask a Lawyer/Legal Aid workshops** (not affiliated with artist/creative services)
- **Urban Harvest Mobile Farmers Market**, a traveling market bringing locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables, stops at Project Row Houses every second Saturday of the month from 10am-1pm.<sup>49</sup>
- **Free Grocery Distribution** (every two weeks), started in 2021; Target Food Hunger food distribution every Third Thursday, plus various pop-up grocery distributions.

Free grocery distribution is needed. The area where Project Row Houses sits is considered a food desert. A Google search showed the closest major grocery store from the center of PRH is almost two miles away. Of the residents in the 2019 Rice University/ Sankofa Institute Third Ward study, 51.4 percent were food-insecure, compared to the national rate of 11.8 percent (Moore, Richards, and Kulesza 2019). In Harris County for 2022, the Zip Code 77004 (where Project Row Houses is located), the “need” index value is at 35.4 (out of 100), but the zip code includes some areas on the other side of the highway, and partially includes the museum district. The adjacent zip code of 77021 has a far more critical need index of 85.3 according to the Houston State of Health Food Insecurity Index for 2022.<sup>50</sup> However, upon closer inspection, the census tract that Project Row Houses sits in has a need index of 89.8. (This portion of the SocioNeeds Index® Suite used data from marketing firm Claritas in 2022).

I observed two virtual health workshops, Building Conflict Resolution Skills (August 24, 2022) and Overcoming Childhood Trauma (August 31, 2022), and one Introduction to Grants for Artists and Creatives virtual workshop (December 6, 2022). The Intro to Grants workshop had four people in attendance. As an artist, I deemed the workshop useful, with in-session written exercises, and slides that were distributed after the presentation. Attendance was small with just two participants for the virtual health workshops, but the information was informative. Three seminars are not a representative sample of attendance for these virtual seminars, and I was informed that attendance varies. I also learned from the Director of Community Initiatives that occasionally programs are requested by the community but not well attended.

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<sup>49</sup> urbanharvest.org + UHMFM pamphlet collected on site, August 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Houston State of Health, “Food Insecurity Index,” [www.houstonstateofhealth.com](https://www.houstonstateofhealth.com/indexsuite/index/foodinsecurity?localeType=3&locale=38479), n.d.  
<https://www.houstonstateofhealth.com/indexsuite/index/foodinsecurity?localeType=3&locale=38479>.

In addition to in-person and virtual programming, there is a plethora of community services information on site. A booklet created by Change Happens! (a community health based non-profit) and the University of Houston College of Medicine, the *3rd Ward Health Resource Directory*, which outlines woman-focused, youth-focused, primary, mental, and specialized health care and food resources, is also distributed on site at PRH (obtained booklet during site visit, August 2022). The booklet listed 53 sites for health and food assistance, including the S.H.A.P.E Center and Project Row Houses.

Regarding behavioral health assistance, PRH did view pertinent data to make sure that it provided what was needed in the area and knew whom to partner with.<sup>51</sup> The first goal is to partner with organizations in the Third Ward to give as many local services to residents as possible; if referrals must be made outside of what PRH can give, PRH aims to make those external sources accessible to the residents of the neighborhood. PRH focuses on the Greater Northern Third Ward, Zip Code 77004. A PRH funder<sup>52</sup> has access to data to measure the effectiveness of their programs. These include increases in net worth, improvement in credit rating, and increases in employment, tracked by the programs F.A.C.E and the Building Blocks of Creative Careers. PRH is working to develop additional metrics to understand the impact of the additional programs and services that they provide.

Many of the impacts of these programs are individual and anecdotal. Ms. Gunter told a story of a woman who came into the F.A.C.E program who was basically homeless and was continuously hospitalized because of mental distress due to her housing situation. PRH was able to refer her to a partner organization, so she was eventually able to receive stable housing. At the time of the interview, PRH didn't have metrics to measure those outcomes to track stabilization and was looking for ways to "better convey impact."

As stated earlier, sometimes the community will ask for things, and then they have not been well attended, like some computer classes, but Gunter emphasized that PRH is always in conversation with the community to address what is needed. In 2022, there was a higher interest in literacy and tutoring in youth programming; Gunter believed that this push was pandemic related.

Liz Sholar, Community Enrichment Manager, primarily oversees the Building Blocks for Creative Careers program and community partnerships and works underneath Ms. Gunter. Ms. Sholar confirmed that there are some quantitative measures that they analyze for effectiveness, like attendance. Still, they

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<sup>51</sup> It was not verified from where.

<sup>52</sup> Via Local Initiatives Support Corporation, <https://www.lisc.org/houston/about-us/our-partners/>.

very much rely on stories from individuals who have said, “This has helped me” or “This community partner did not answer my question, I needed this, but they didn’t have experience.”

### **Neighborhood Dynamics (2022-2023)**

Site observation of housing typology and housing upkeep showed that there are substantial economic disparities within the Third Ward. One can traverse two blocks northeast from Project Row Houses to see houses in unimaginable disrepair adjacent to new construction for what can be perceived as more affluent families (Figure 21). However, someone can also travel two blocks southeast from Project Row Houses and find that the residences are more middle class, the lawns are manicured, and BMW SUVs can be seen pulling into driveways.



**Figure 19** (left and right) New townhouse construction versus some existing residences and empty lots. Photos by the author.

There is lots of development from Elgin Street back towards Highway 45, one mile to the north (refer to map in beginning of this chapter). There is a juxtaposition of new construction with plots of single-family houses that have been torn down (Figure 21). Single lots that have one house sit next to lots of the same size that can have two to four units. I interviewed a planner with the city of Houston who discussed Houston’s approach to development: “Houston does not have zoning regulations, but new development

must abide by ordinances and state permitting and codes.” The Land Assemblage Redevelopment Authority (LARA) is part of a complex development landscape. The LARA agreement, between the City of Houston, Houston Independent School Districts, and Harris County, was for the city to acquire vacant land that people had walked away from (average at that time was 18 years delinquent). The city would sell these tax-delinquent sites at auction (for as little as cents on the dollar).<sup>53</sup> Any property that was not sold at auction would be used by the city and LARA to create housing. In the Third Ward (since it is close to downtown, the medical center, and close to universities) any vacant lots would be of high interest. As a result, there were bidding wars, and the price of land skyrocketed, almost to the point where it is prohibitively expensive to build, especially affordable housing. Many vacant properties that remain in the Third Ward are vacant because people are holding the land hoping to make substantial profits on flipping or selling it. LARA eventually evolved into the Houston Land Bank. Its mission remains “to transform properties that have become community liabilities because their condition reduces the quality of life for neighbors and burden taxpayers to community assets that provide opportunities for affordable homeownership and amenities that support community needs.”<sup>54</sup> The program helps potential homebuyers qualify for affordable home programs to purchase newly constructed single-family homes and helps builders find lots so they may construct homes.

Nonetheless, with all the new construction there is still an affordable housing shortage in the neighborhood. “There is a [significant] housing unit deficit in the Third Ward,” says Libby Viera-Bland, Director of Neighborhood Development with PRH CDC. Ms. Viera-Bland was also a social practice fellow with PRH in 2018 (the fellowship is hosted jointly by the University of Houston and Project Row Houses). She is project manager for future new construction and land acquisition and holds degrees in architecture and city planning.

Ms. Viera-Bland stated that many landlords in the neighborhood do not maintain their rental properties. This data is supported by the Rice University/Sankofa Institute report from 2019. The PRH Preservation arm purchased an entire block of homes built in 1930 from a former landlord who was not taking care of the properties (e.g., plumbing was not working and floors were deteriorating). Naturally affordable housing (i.e., inexpensive private housing) is vital to neighborhood stability and cultural preservation. The organization felt it was essential to buy the properties and protect the residents so

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<sup>53</sup> One interviewee told me that some pieces of land were going for less than \$5000.

<sup>54</sup> Houston Land Bank, <https://houstonlandbank.org/>.

that they could remain in the neighborhood. As with the Rice Building Workshop, partnerships with PRH CDC are formed through informal relationships. PRH board members and Hines Real Estate help to bring in pro bono services for the CDC. After some research, I believe this is the same Hines Real Estate that is the Development Manager of The Ion District.<sup>55</sup> The development arm of PRH has been inactive since the last PRH CDC structures were built around 2013. Ms. Viera-Bland commented that people tend to give money to Project Row Houses but don't know about the sister organizations of PRH CDC and PRH Preservation, which is why the operations have been dormant for many years:

It is very difficult to get funding. Many CDCs operate on a debt model; we are an extremely affordable housing organization. We don't have the revenue to take in and run on a debt model where taking on loans is a viable option. PRH Preservation was able to purchase those homes because of foundation grants. The land where the duplexes were built was donated to PRH, and because of that donation, it was easier to receive other funding to get the houses built. So, there hasn't been a sustainable model thus far to continue.

Finding funding continues to be a challenge. I was informed that PRH CDC and PRH Preservation were supposed to receive a five-million-dollar community development block grant through disaster recovery funding from the city of Houston and the state GLO, Texas General Land Office, which would have resulted in the construction of over fourteen new housing units. Because of administrative and political challenges between the GLO and the city of Houston, that funding (at the time of the interview) had not come in.

At the time of this writing, the CDC plans to go through a strategic planning process after years of being dormant, with regard to long-term property management and the overall goals of the CDC. For example, do they want the residents to eventually stabilize so that they can become homeowners or move into market-rate housing? Will it be the long-term solution for some residents, such as aging residents who need a way to age in place? Some older residents have approached PRH CDC to purchase their homes so they may age in place without having to contend with a mortgage.<sup>56</sup>

Other neighborhood dynamics include the complex (and occasionally adversarial) relationships with large institutions like universities (the "town-gown" relationship). The connection between a community and a university can be tough, with the university being viewed as taking over an area or as an isolated ivory tower. Conversations with another local artist revealed some have slightly questioned

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<sup>55</sup> Hines, "The Ion," <https://www.hines.com/properties/the-ion-houston>, accessed July 25, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Libby Viera-Bland, August 24, 2022.



Rick Lowe's role as a faculty member of the University of Houston (UH). Speculation exists that he has the ear of the current president, Renu Khator, in terms of UH wanting to create a museum mile that starts at UH and includes PRH and then goes on to the main museums. Is Rick Lowe's relationship with UH "too cozy" since UH is seen by many in the Third Ward as a gentrifying force? Is PRH's alliance with UH complicated because UH has knocked down some property in the Third Ward to build dorms and other buildings? I was informed that some residents have mixed feelings about the University of Houston's activities in the Third Ward. Feelings naturally vary. A staff member at PRH stated, "Having a strong anchor in the community like a university is a net positive."

The University of Houston also launched the Third Ward Initiative with the tagline "Education. Empowerment. Growth." The initiative's goals include helping twenty-five businesses over five years, increasing clinical health care services and programs to address area health disparities, and increasing university and neighborhood association through art and culture, including through a program to establish ten fellows to engage with Rick Lowe to learn about socially engaged art.<sup>57</sup>

## Impact and Perceptions

I spoke with a Houston-based urban planning faculty member and asked them about Project Row Houses' impact on the Third Ward:

It's no question that PRH has certainly had a significant impact on its community. [In terms of public health impact] PRH has a level of legitimization, they are key players in the historic (or Northern) Third Ward. I believe they function in an organic way; as they have matured, they have been really involved in either spearheading or a part of collaborations that have attempted to improve the quality of life in the historic Third Ward... Through EEDC what has happened, PRH has been involved in trying to stymie evictions; while historically they haven't played a role in heavily influencing community development policy, through their collaborations through EEDC they established a neighborhood association. Houston is a city where renters have been treated like secondary citizens—in order to establish or maintain leadership in neighborhood associations you have to be a homeowner. That is a challenge because many of the people who live in the Northern Third Ward are lower-income and there's a high level of people who do rent and the [area] did not have a homeowners association, and the city was saying they couldn't have one. Through the EEDC's efforts, many of the individuals who lived in PRH housing was a part of this effort to influence the city to change the rules so that a neighborhood association that is run by tenants could be officially sanctioned. I know they have been involved in neighborhood beautification and neighborhood cleanups. There was quite a bit of places in the northern Third Ward that have served as illegal dumping grounds. As a major player in EEDC,

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<sup>57</sup> University of Houston, "Third Ward Initiative," <https://uh.edu/third-ward/index.php>.

PRH was certainly involved in efforts to eliminate dumping in the Third Ward. Illegal dumping is more than an eyesore; it is a health hazard.

The challenge for PRH is moving beyond art-based community development. In Houston we just don't have a history of community development activities. When PRH was founded many years ago, for the most part they were the only game in town and they worked in an informal way. They weren't pushing any policy levers... A lot of what PRH has accomplished is more programmatic and less policy. Policy is a major lever that helps to sustain change. I think that has been a major challenge for PRH over the years. But the question [is], is it realistic to expect them to do it?



**Figure 20** Rick Lowe at Project Row Houses. Photo courtesy John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Brian Ellison, an artist working in PRH explained the feeling of community of those involved with the project, including the artists-mentorship program:

Before I started officially working for PRH I was volunteering here. You just sit on the block, and you come across a lot of amazing people. It's just a Mecca of amazing talent and community. A real, for-real community.

Ellison went on to describe living in the community of PRH, providing a fine-grained sense of the multiple social interactions that occur on the site:

[Project Row Houses is the] heartbeat that keeps the culture in the city of Houston. Everything is impacted by the heart. PRH is that vital piece that helps the [art] community thrive in the city. Opening day of Rounds, I always remember having conversations where people would comment, "I remember being ten and coming here and doing art. I had Ms. So-and-so and she was my teacher here and it was the first time I did art. Or they talk about playing dominoes here on the block. All these things that can be referred to as activations, but they are just regular things that we do here... The beauty that hides in plain sight. That's what Third Ward is.

I can't remember what Round it was, but I remember sitting on the porch and seeing these two big buses pull up and loads and loads of people got off. I learned that it was people from across the world coming to experience PRH. To see what it is, see how it impacts the community, coming to learn! But also, being in awe with the artists, with what they saw. I sold one of my photos to the French Embassy because of that. Someone from the French Embassy was on one of those buses, and that was my first sale of my work. This model is so unique, so powerful, and so beautiful is that people want to study this so they can replicate it on their own."

I interviewed a third artist and local professor who participated in work at PRH and had past and current students work at the organization. They taught career workshops at PRH and stated the following:

I think [PRH] has had a hugely positive impact, certainly on the neighborhood. A lot of people who grew up in Houston get involved in PRH. I have conversations with them about how PRH is particularly great because someone who is a junior in undergrad can apply for their summer studios program and potentially get in, then list it as a residency, list it as an upcoming show. And it's not just a local accolade, but because PRH has a national reach they get to interact with artists that come in the Rounds and meet international artists. They get access as a young emerging artist, and the name carries more weight and opens the doors for other opportunities... I really appreciate how PRH interacts with the Houston art scene in very positive ways...because it is very well respected but very accessible to show there to BIPOC artists.

When asked about the impact outside of the arts scene, they responded:

They have really big public openings where they block off the streets and have art workshops and events for kids. They have a lot of local merchants where only people who are from the Third Ward can have stands, so they are bringing people [from] all over the city, and which support the vendors.

In 2013, Project Row Houses hosted a weeklong “Social Practice. Social Justice” symposium at the Eldorado Ballroom to celebrate its 20th anniversary. This symposium included a conversation with Rick Lowe, Theaster Gates, and Mark Bradford (the same conversation discussed in this paper’s introduction) (Dennis 2018). Coincidentally, 2013 was the year that Mark Bradford (and partners) established Art + Practice.

Rick Lowe states that, from the inception of PRH, he was "not concerned with the art itself but with what it is supposed to do" (Goldberg 1995). Almost twenty years later, Lowe reflected on the collaborations that made model of PRH successful: “For sure all the programs of Project Row Houses didn’t come from me. They came from inviting people who are really good at developing programs—giving them the space to be involved and see what the possibilities were” (Finkelpearl 2013, 138).



**Figure 21** Sam Durant, *We Are the People*, 2003. Exhibition Round 19, Photo courtesy of Project Row Houses.

## **Conclusion**

Project Row Houses has become the official landmark and representation of the Third Ward neighborhood. A photo of Project Row Houses is on the opening page of advertisements or reports by many Third Ward-based organizations. Because of its maturity as an arts-based community-facing organization, Project Row Houses has a significant perceived effect on the Third Ward, and on the city of Houston. It is considered a tourist destination.<sup>58</sup> PRH has enriched the lives of the community of the Third Ward in tangible and intangible ways. Although the Third Ward has higher housing and food insecurity rates and a lower median income compared to the city's averages, their presence has provided a sense of cultural identity and social cohesion. On the contrary, many residents would fare much worse if PRH was not there because of its multiple physical and behavioral health services, financial literacy and legal assistance services, food distribution programs, art education programs, and open and nurturing relationships with those in the community.

PRH has bolstered the community by helping people gain job training, establish businesses, and resume their place in society after incarceration; it has helped make long-term residents able to stay in their homes. The aspect of strong social cohesion is evident. The Third Ward was a connected community before the establishment of Project Row Houses, and some could argue that PRH sustains and adds to those values; people make memories at PRH, start their artistic careers with the Rounds, and have started cottage industries and regulated businesses. In thirty years of an impressive tenure, what they were not able to do was resist the more prominent market forces that were and are taking over parts of the neighborhood. Of course, that was not the initial aim: it was to create an arts-based, community-engaged project. However, through the Emancipation Economic Development Council and the Emancipation Community Development Partnership, they have been able to be a powerful advocate for all Third Ward residents concerning how the area develops, affordable housing, cultural preservation, and they have indirectly influenced policy through the mayor's office.

Some of the predominant themes in the interviews from all three case studies I conducted were ideas of Black spaces, cultural identity, specificity of place (i.e., pride in the history and culture of specific neighborhoods), and connection. Specifically, the Third Ward was known as a stronghold of Black spatial

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<sup>58</sup> Visit Houston, "Project Row Houses | Things to Do in Houston, TX," <https://www.visithoustontexas.com/listings/project-row-houses/21031/>.

agency, community, and creativity. How have these organizations contributed to the ideas of Black spatial agency? Partially by celebrating Black culture to assert Black ownership over physical space. These art spaces and organizations are open to everyone to enjoy and be a part of, but they are centered on rejoicing and honoring the lived experiences of African Americans. All three organizations I have studied lionize local and national Black culture.

During interviews, many individuals expressed the importance of being able to truly be themselves and feel seen during their interactions with others at the organizations. While Black art served as a way to see their experiences reflected, the interviewees predominantly emphasized the value of community, acceptance, and a culture of care.

I began the dissertation with two main questions:

1. How are nationally lauded arts-based development projects perceived in their communities in terms of neighborhood outcomes, including displacement and culture loss in African American areas?
2. What can be learned about the potential for such arts-based initiatives to benefit their local communities?

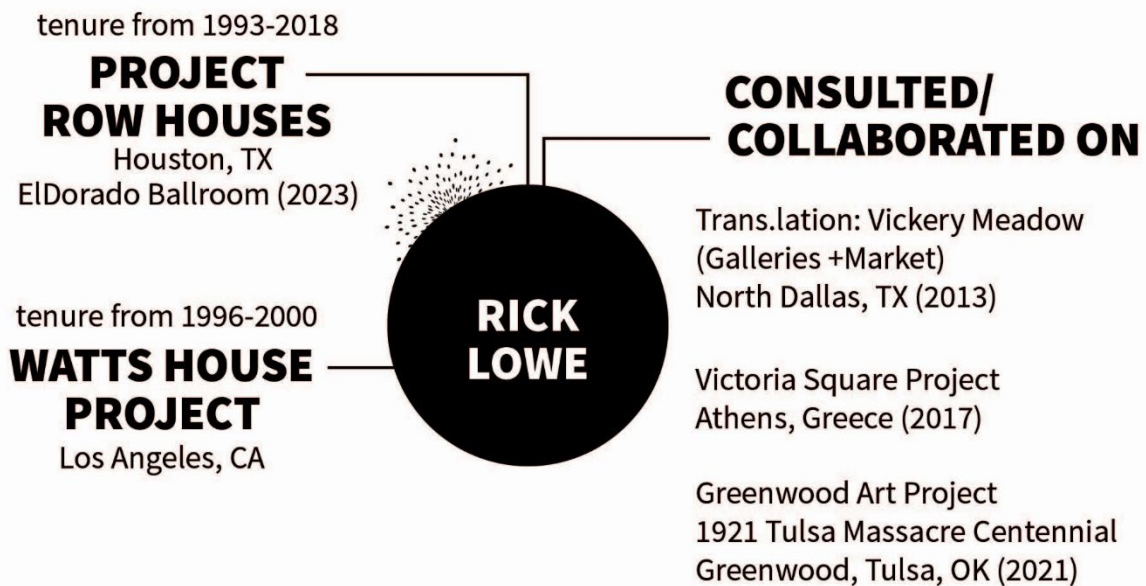
To answer the first question, I used interviews and printed and social media and discovered that they are generally perceived as positive, in terms of both physical displacement and cultural preservation. Project Row Houses, through its Young Mothers Residential Program, PRH CDC, and PRH Preservation arms have provided stable housing for some of the most vulnerable citizens in Houston. Through the Emancipation Economic Development Council, they have partnered with other community organizations to help drive the direction of growth in the Third Ward. Cultural loss and displacement are still of concern in the Greater Third Ward because of the changing racial and socioeconomic demographics, but PRH set an example to celebrate and preserve the history and culture of the area while reinforcing social cohesion and community. As reflected in the interviews, it has been successful at it.

To answer the second question: What can be learned about the potential for such arts-based initiatives to benefit their local communities? The answer is complex as the three generally well-run and well-organized projects I researched did have some weaknesses in specific areas like communication, but one of their strengths is ownership. If land or property is not owned on a large scale, these organizations can create a ripple, but not enough to resist the larger market real estate forces. Of course, this is true for any kind of community development organization, but what is interesting is these arts-based projects leveraged property to make a difference in communities.



Another takeaway is that, at least with many in a community, social cohesion is possible if an organization creates programming geared toward bonding, wellness, arts, and creativity. Social cohesion can be created in various places, but arts organizations can be uniquely suited to trigger those dynamics.

It's best to leave the last words to one of the Magnificent Seven, "Brother Jesse" Lott. When asked if he was excited about Project Row Houses' future and about his turning 80 on the day after the Eldorado Grand Ballroom reopened after years of restoration, Jesse Lott said, "Oh yeah, I'm excited about the future. It would be nice to be here." Eureka Gilkey asked what he wants to see as part of the future of Project Row Houses. He replied, "What I would like to see is the [establishing] of a banking system so that any child in the first grade would be given a bank account. Every child that walks through the door should get a bank account. Then we would really be doing something like revolution." Finally, when asked about what he would say to the cultural workers continuing to work at Project Row Houses, he offered encouragement: "Keep up the good work. And keep expanding." PRH, via their Instagram account, shared the news of Brother Jesse's passing on July 24, 2023.



**Figure 22** Rick Lowe's Community Development-Built Projects

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