



WHAT WE MADE

Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation

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FIVE SOCIAL VISION AND A COOPERATIVE COMMUNITY

Project Row Houses RICK LOWE, ARTIST,
AND MARK J. STERN,
PROFESSOR OF
SOCIAL HISTORY AND
URBAN STUDIES

IN 1993 the artist Rick Lowe led a group in founding *Project Row Houses*, an organization that has since become an important player in the development of Houston's Third Ward by renovating a series of shotgun houses and translating them into an art and community center; by expanding the campus to provide housing for single mothers; by acquiring, renovating, and reactivating a historically significant ballroom; and by building new affordable housing. An early inspiration for the project was the interpretation and depiction of row houses by the Houston-based African American painter John Biggers. But the original twenty-two shotgun houses on a block and a half were only the start: the organization now extends six blocks and includes forty properties. It is an artist-led nonprofit corporation, but it is also the Row House Community Development Corporation, an affiliated but separate corporation that has designed and built low-income housing units.

In general there is no hesitation in the rhetoric of Lowe and others at *Project Row Houses* to ascribe social goals to the endeavor. The website proclaims that the project is “founded on the principle that art—and the community it creates—can be the foundation for revitalizing depressed inner-city neighborhoods.”¹ But it also claims an aesthetic dimension in architectural preservation and innovation, the ongoing creation and presentation of contemporary art projects on site, and, most relevant for this book, the notion that there can be an aesthetic of human development and action. (For further discussion of how this project plays out in the unique environment of Houston, see the conclusion.)

In the following interview Lowe narrates the genesis of the project, starting from an impetus to do something substantial and effective within the African American community. Like many of the examples in this

book, the project unfolded slowly, as did Lowe's own understanding of exactly what he was doing. It was only after the project was under way that he began to understand it in terms of Joseph Beuys's notion of social sculpture.

As in the interview with the artist Harrell Fletcher and the planner Ethan Seltzer (chapter 6), it is interesting to see how Lowe and the social historian Mark J. Stern differ in approach even as their interests overlap. Not surprisingly for an urban studies professor, Stern is interested in measuring social phenomena; he has worked, for example, to develop a "revitalization index." But his observations based on this index are similar to Lowe's in many ways; their methods represent different routes to similar ideas. Even as he speaks the language of the social sciences, Stern is profoundly sympathetic to the arts. As a pragmatic observer of the city who can produce quantitative charts of social networks, he is suspicious of standard measurements of the effects of the arts and argues for an understanding of arts groups as "irrational organizations" that should not be measured by orthodox benchmarks.

RICK LOWE is the founder of *Project Row Houses*, a multidecade experiment in social action, preservation, community development, and public art. He has participated in exhibitions and lectured nationally and internationally and received the 2000 American Institute of Architecture Keystone Award, the 2002 Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities, the 2005 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Governors Award, the Lenore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change in 2009, and other awards. He was a Loeb Fellow at Harvard University in 2002 and has served in Houston as a member of SHAPE Community Center, the Municipal Arts Commission, and the Civic Arts Program and as a board member of the Greater Houston Visitors and Conventions Bureau.

MARK J. STERN is a professor of social welfare and history and the co-director of the Urban Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. The coauthor (with Michael B. Katz and Michael J. Doucet) of *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (1982), Stern cofounded (with Susan Seifert) the Social Impact of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania, which since 1994 has studied the role of community cultural providers in improving the quality of life in urban neighborhoods. In 2006 he again collaborated with Katz on a book, this time a social history

of the United States in the twentieth century, *One Nation, Divisible: What America Was and What It Is Becoming*.

The following conversation took place at Mark J. Stern's office at the University of Pennsylvania in November 2004, with follow-up discussions by phone in July 2005.

TOM FINKELPEARL: Can we begin by talking about the genesis of *Project Row Houses*?

RICK LOWE: As I speak about it in hindsight, I can say how *Project Row Houses* evolved and how these collaborations happened. But back there looking forward, I didn't have a clue about collaborative art. I knew that I was interested in work that pushed beyond the boundaries in terms of social engagement, beyond what we call "political art." Early on I was doing art that was political—billboard-size work used as the backdrop for political rallies. It was socially engaged on one level, but there was a leap that I felt like I needed to take to figure out how to make art that wasn't created in a way where the audience stood back, but where they were actually engaged. One sure way to engage people is to find something bigger than you are, beyond your capacity, and it forces you to build some kind of relationship to others to move the project forward.

I was interested in issues of low-income African American communities—how to contribute, using creativity, to help transform some of the conditions of the environment. Blight was a huge issue. I was also thinking about the community brain drain. Everybody's always leaving, and nobody's coming in. I thought of myself as a part of that brain drain. The resources that I had accumulated over time were not going back into the neighborhood. So how do you pull those things together?

The first step in the collaboration was with a small group of artists. I had interacted in groups before, but not with the specific purpose of trying to figure out how to address these issues in a low-income African American community. Once I hooked up with those artists—there were seven of us—we began to explore the possibilities for bringing our work into the community, and that was exciting for me. But no one had the know-how or the energy at the time to figure out how to build a structure through which we could make

ourselves available. I was the most active in this community, so it kind of fell on my shoulders to figure it out.

MARK J. STERN: The character of the engagement with the community?

RL: Yeah. To figure out a situation in which we could bring our resources into the community.

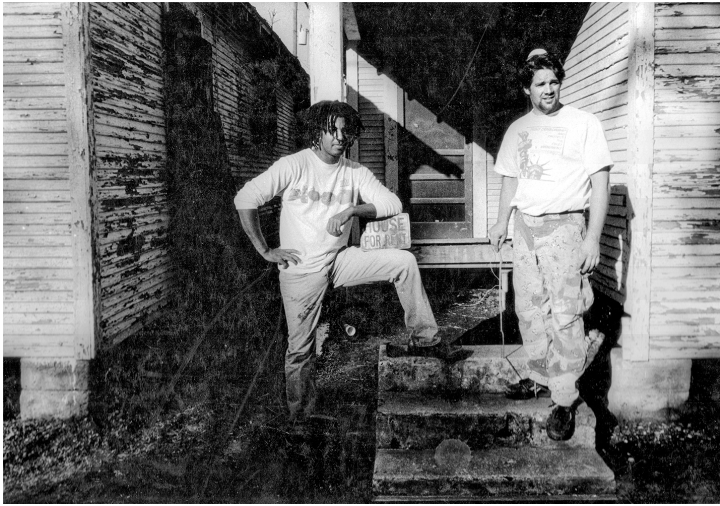
TF: Rick, when you say “the community,” are you talking about Houston’s Third Ward?

RL: We were talking about how to do something in an African American community in Houston, not any specific place. But I was thinking specifically about the Third Ward because I was doing volunteer work there, and I had done these installations there at this little place called SHAPE. The name was one of those acronyms that didn’t exactly fit: Self Help for African People through Education.

TF: Were you already living there at that time?

RL: No, this was in 1990 and 1991. I was living on the west side of town. As we started to think about this, I was on a bus tour organized by SHAPE with a group that was looking at dangerous places, places that needed to be torn down and dealt with. We passed these little shotgun houses, and that was the first time I thought about the houses—you know, the scale of the houses, and how as artists we could utilize those houses as a way of reflecting something to the community. Of course, in the beginning we didn’t have resources or the long-term vision of the collaborative process that could build an institution or create systems with sustainability. We were just thinking about doing some kind of guerrilla art project that would happen and then we’d go away.

As time went on in my researching possibilities in the area, I came across Joseph Beuys and his idea of social sculpture, which he defined as the way in which we shape and mold the world around us. This was interesting as a potential kind of work. And there was something about those houses that was hauntingly reminiscent of John Biggers’s paintings. Biggers was a senior African American artist in Houston who died three years ago. I started looking at Biggers’s paintings and trying to understand the houses from that point of view, until I realized there was a possibility there that went beyond a temporary act of guerrilla art. At that point I realized it was going to be something that was way beyond me as an individual, bigger even than the seven of us artists, so I started planting the seed and telling people what the possibilities were.



Rick Lowe (left) with the artist Dean Ruck in 1993 during the beginning of the renovations and rebuilding of *Project Row Houses*. Photograph by David Robinson. Courtesy of *Project Row Houses*.

MJS: So was there an “aha” moment? Or did the idea build over time?

RL: There were a couple of “ahas.” The first “aha” was simply seeing the houses with this community group. We were talking about tearing them down, and we all agreed that this would be the correct course of action. But after looking at Biggers’s work and really thinking about it, I drove to that corner again one day and looked again, and all of a sudden I thought, “Aha! Wow! Look at that.”

MJS: There’s a value there.

RL: Yes. I just remember standing there. It was a rainy day, and the roofs get a little purple and it’s a beautiful sight. So there was enough of an indication that something was there that I was able to drag people over there and talk. And the other artists got involved and excited as well, which gave me more confidence to talk about it and be enthusiastic.

MJS: Interesting. You know, before I was working in the arts, I was essentially doing research on urban poverty. One of the things I was working on in the early ’90s was an essay that argued that the idea of the underclass was about reinforcing boundaries between “us” and “them.” The way I got involved with looking at the arts was around the fact that too many people were wanting to tear things down.

There are all these neighborhoods in Philadelphia that people only look at as deficits—that are defined just by the negative. But there are all these other dimensions of those neighborhoods that get obliterated when we just apply that negative label to them. Part of our work in the arts was to say that there are resources and assets in these neighborhoods that are invisible or below the radar, and seeing these assets was our motivation. So it's interesting that at the same time, in the early 1990s, your engagement came out of thinking about what these neighborhoods were like, but also reflecting on the objects themselves. The houses themselves were part of your motivation.

- RL: Right. And it's also about not only thinking about it abstractly. As creative-minded people, we all do that. We all look probably ten or fifteen times a day at something and think about what it could be, what values may be underneath. But then there's that other difficult step to actively engage and try to uncover and reveal those things in a way that moves either yourself or other people to action, and that's the difficult part.
- TF: Rick, quite frankly, you may look at things ten or fifteen times a day and see potential, but that is a tremendously optimistic outlook. Others might look ten times a day at the problems that the city presents and get depressed. But even for the most optimistic and active person, as you say, there is a difference between seeing potential and activating it.
- RL: It's frustrating for artists like myself who enjoy doing that, when you can't make this kind of work happen in other places and other environments, because you can only take the first step. You can only look at it and use that creativity to envision what the possibilities might be, but there still has to be that other level of really tangibly tearing into it, pulling things out, bringing things to it to make the value actual instead of just latent or conceptual. It's frustrating when you can see it so clearly but can't make it happen. I have had situations where I can see the potential, but I can't pass that understanding to the people in the community. It's a struggle to empower others to be able to see it. That is where the collaboration, the coalition building comes in.

But with *Project Row Houses* it was so easy, for some reason. Once the core of seven artists got excited, we went to *DiverseWorks*, which is an alternative art space in Houston, and talked to people

there and dragged them over to see, and they got excited. They were the ones who gave us the idea or planted the seed that it could be sustainable and not just a one-time project. So from them it went to the NEA. We drafted a proposal talking about how we were going to rehab these old houses and bring artists in from all over the country to do work in this low-income African American neighborhood, and so on. It was kind of a far-fetched proposal at the time, but there was a quality about it that resonated with people quickly. The folks at the NEA saw something interesting, so instead of throwing the proposal out when they realized we hadn't even gotten any kind of agreement on the property, they sent us a letter stating that they were interested in the proposal, as a way of giving us leverage to negotiate with the guy who owned the property. You know, they actually became participants, in a sense. The owner was an architect living in Taiwan. Once I was able to fax him a letter from the NEA saying that they were interested in the project, he became interested, and we got a lease-purchase agreement.

We were able to start with a small group of artists — basically the seven of us and a few others from the DiverseWorks circle — to clean and clear the site. And then folks from the neighborhood started coming. At this point, as I said, I had no idea how to go about building a collaboration, to reach the goals. But the one thing that was very obvious was that if we were going to do it, it wasn't going to be just us doing it. It was going to take a broad group. During that time I started to really see my role as an artist as trying to uncover the meaning of the place and creating opportunities for people to give that meaning a place to live within the project in reality. And so it went from children in the neighborhood to church groups, museum groups, corporate groups, and a wide range of other professionals with technical expertise, from architects and historians, to attorneys, to people who conceptualized programs. 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.

MJS: So there were really two kinds of engagement: a community engagement that was about involving people who lived in that physical place, but also an engagement process that brought in folks with whom you wouldn't necessarily work as an artist, but whom you needed to actually make it happen.



Amoco employees from across the United States participating in the first large-scale volunteer effort at *Project Row Houses*, organized by Amoco Torch Classics, a program for the corporate Olympics. This effort renovated the exteriors of sixteen houses in 1994. Photograph courtesy of *Project Row Houses*.

RL: I see that duality all the time, especially in terms of the audiences for *Project Row Houses*. There is the need for people inside the community to benefit from what we're doing on a service basis. But at the same time we realized that *Project Row Houses* was also intended for people outside the community to participate, to benefit from the opportunity to interact in a different kind of environment. For example, we'd have a group from the Mormon Church come and do a volunteer day. Some of these folks wouldn't otherwise have an opportunity to be engaged on a grassroots level with low-income African American folks working on something that is a positive experience. There's that engagement that both sides benefit from, the service part, but also the resources coming in from outside.

MJS: This relates to the work we've done in Philadelphia in terms of explaining to the funders how community arts work. There's this assumption that, when you say "community art," it works like community health or community development. There is a common notion that community art centers should essentially serve their local area, like you could draw a line around whom they serve. And one of our big findings was that most of the audience for community arts

programs in Philadelphia comes from outside the neighborhood in which a given center is located. Originally the arts funding programs were upset about this observation. But if you're an artist and your only engagement is within this limited geography, you feel like there's something missing.

RL: Yes.

MJS: Part of our lobbying in Philadelphia was around saying that "community arts" doesn't mean grandmothers with coloring books in their front yards. We're simultaneously about community activity and serious art. And if it is about art, then people involved with it don't want to say, "I just do it between Third and Fifteenth Streets." It's been simultaneously trying to figure out how these networks operate—and how you get this depth within community but also the connections across a region, or across an entire city. Empirically trying to figure that out has been a challenge. It's been trying to explain to a wider audience that one of the unique values of community arts is that they simultaneously can engage local communities and networks of people that are nongeographical.

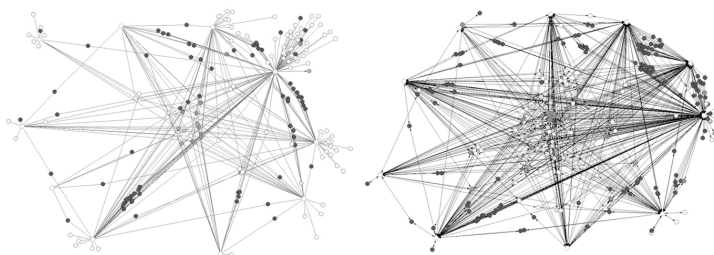
RL: That's true. I think people are missing the point when they say that you can't really talk about community-based art in a critical sense because it's just about that community. I mean, if it's community-based art, from my standpoint, it's a community-based activity that's trying to identify some kind of higher order or existence of activities that is not only beneficial for the folks inside the community but should be of interest for people outside the community if they want to better understand the elements that create life and vitality within these communities.

TF: Rick, have you ever seen the charts that Mark has made that visualize the web of interconnectivity in community arts activities?

RL: I haven't.

TF: They look like spider webs. We're looking at a couple of them here. Mark, can you explain what we are looking at?

MJS: Well, these are really two network diagrams we've done based on work we were doing on community arts. For the first one, we interviewed fifty-five artists and asked them about organizations with which they had connections. No big surprise—you can see the average artist had connections with five different arts organizations over the previous year. The chart gives you a feel for both the range of the networks and the fact that there are these connections people don't



Institutional networks 1997

Institutional networks 2000

Mark Stern's research has shown that the nonprofit arts sector can help build social networks. This graphic is a visualization of how networks grew in a Philadelphia neighborhood over a three-year period, and it is these charts that Stern and Lowe discuss in the interview. 2002. Courtesy of the Social Impact of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania, and Mark Stern.

even know they have. The other drawing is of institutional connections for ten arts organizations we were following, connections with other kinds of organizations, both arts and nonarts. We did another survey this summer of artists in which the whole sampling strategy was based on getting one artist to refer us to other artists. The study was based on developing networks of artists. I think we ended up with sixty-five different contacts coming out of just one artist who referred us to three people, and those three people referred us to nine more people, and those nine referred us to twenty-seven, and so on. One of the big emphases of this work has been these vertical and horizontal networks and the recognition that you've got to have both to do what we call community building—which is building out within a community, and building from the communities out.

RL: Was there a connection between the diversity of the connections and the success of the institutions?

MJS: You can see that certain organizations aren't as likely to have crises, either because of luck or because they've created networks that bridge resources, like the link you made with the Mormon Church. One of our big "aha" moments was when we ran into this group of essentially faith-based community arts programs that just had a certain vitality to them. We realized that they were Roman Catholic-based. And in town—I don't know if this is the same everywhere—if you're involved in the Catholic Church, you're embedded in a network that crosses boundaries, that links suburbs to the city and

spans communities. For example, Norris Square Neighborhood Project up in Kensington, a low-income Latino area, can easily connect with eight or ten suburban Catholic colleges and universities. When they call on students from those colleges, there's a set of resources that they can pull into the neighborhood based on the pre-existing community. Other organizations are more intentional in terms of saying, "We're going to build this network out."

RL: I know a lot of smaller, particularly African American groups that are really trying to control their identity, and so they don't allow too much verticality in terms of the way they reach out. There's a certain kind of limitation in terms of resources and the connections they make. It becomes very insular in the way they allow themselves to be seen and talked about. They limit their social networks; they don't allow anyone to be critical of them, because, you know, they're within their own little sphere of activity. But when you start going more vertical and going out, it kind of forces that organization to look critically at itself. That's one of the things that arts and culture can bring to community-based projects — that kind of verticality.

MJS: Right. And boundary pushing. The boundaries between groups are shifting and complicated.

RL: I deal with that all the time in terms of how to allow *Project Row Houses* to maintain an identity as an organization that's African American-centered but, at the same time, exposed and open to cultural views and outlooks from all over. And I see that some African American organizations are somewhat resentful of that.

TF: Some organizations are based on a horizontal interconnection first, as I think yours is, and others are based on a top-down structure first, and then reach out to the community. The top-down structure starts with a well-connected, rich, politically savvy board of trustees that oversees the activities of an executive director, who in turn manages a staff who might choose to work with local community groups. This is different from an organization born from and based on a horizontal coalition.

RL: Yes, this is certainly a different way of working, and I think community-based collaborative art can reflect these two structures as well. There are artists whose most significant contribution is connecting the art world to the community rather than fostering the interconnections within the community. I'm not completely against that idea, because I think there is some benefit in creating work

that's about educating on a grassroots level. That's an important way of working. But my inclination, my sensibility, is about helping create collaboration and interconnection among the core populations that I'm working with, but in a way that maintains and reinforces the importance of the vertical connections.

MJS: In our work we discovered that the one unique feature of cultural engagement is that it really operates across boundaries of race and ethnicity and also across boundaries of neighborhoods. Based on our analysis of participation, we've established that people from outside poor neighborhoods who are involved in the arts of those neighborhoods are a key component of overall civic participation. It's precisely those neighborhoods that have high levels of this cross-participation across boundaries that, over the course of the '90s and into the early twenty-first century, have done better in terms of poverty reduction and population growth. We have a measure that we call our revitalization index, which combines population growth and reduction in poverty. There's a fairly significant correlation between neighborhoods with a lot of this outside participation and positive numbers in that index. The vertical connections are critical simply because of the lack of resources in these neighborhoods, and you need to get those connections up to different social classes and particularly to different institutions. Now, I will say that the character of the connections between more established cultural organizations and community-based ones is, in our view, a weakness in terms of the overall cultural system, at least in Philadelphia. Those connections are overlaid with tensions around social class, race, and ethnicity, and that seems to be a barrier. That is an area where we really see a deficiency in terms of the overall network or ecosystem of culture in Philadelphia.

Part of the new urban reality is that diversity is connected to vital neighborhoods. It used to be that you saw mixed neighborhoods as essentially an indicator of some problem. Forty years ago in Philadelphia mixed neighborhoods were considered mixed from the time the first African American moved in to the time that the last white person moved out. Today it's different. Now people see diverse neighborhoods as a key part of the city landscape. We can demonstrate in neighborhoods that arts activity is the leading indicator of diversity, and that those together are also the indicator of neighborhoods that are undergoing revitalization. That's on a more abstract

level. But it is connected to the fact that arts programs are able to take a particular place and draw resources and people from all over the city. Don't get me wrong. It's not a panacea in the sense that all you have to do is put a couple of arts programs in a poor neighborhood and it'll be transformed.

TF: It's my impression that by far the most diverse place in the Third Ward is *Project Row Houses*—economically, racially, and professionally. You might bump into an architect; you might bump into a kid in an afterschool program. Rick, you live there and I don't, but when we drove around the Third Ward it didn't seem like a particularly diverse neighborhood.

RL: Yes. Mark's right in the sense that one of the ways that arts and cultural institutions add value is by providing an opportunity for people to come and contribute to a neighborhood's diversity. So much development of urban neighborhoods is being driven by land values, and it's causing a demographic shift. So the question is, do we have to allow the shift in demographics to take place as it's happened in the past, where one group comes in and the other moves out, or can we create opportunities for a kind of staying period for this diverse population?

MJS: It gets complicated, because in a certain way *Project Row Houses* both becomes an engine for change in the neighborhood and attempts to be a stabilizer of that process.

RL: Yes.

MJS: Can you simultaneously cause property values to go up and also structure the program so that people who are in the neighborhood have an opportunity to stay put? Is that part of your agenda?

RL: Well, the rise in property values in the Third Ward probably would have happened with or without *Project Row Houses*. The neighborhood would have been earmarked for gentrification because of its central location. Before we came in, the Planning Department had already replanned the property as if the houses were gone. So something was going to happen with or without our intervention. We could have taken a different approach and said that we would take a stand to fight gentrification, any kind of diversification, any kind of change. We could have been more horizontal in our community building. And you know, there are still people in the community who feel that way. But I knew it would be a losing battle, and I also just felt that seeking diversity was the right thing to do—in



Jesse Lott (far right), one of the founders of *Project Row Houses*, speaks to Regina Agu, an artist from Houston, 2010. In the background left Hadeel Assali (facing camera), founder of Houston Palestine Film Festival, talks to two visitors. Photograph by Eric Hester. Courtesy of *Project Row Houses*.

the sense of trying to instill a community based on desegregation culture.

MJS: Our research showing that neighborhoods with lots of arts organizations tend to see their poverty rate go down over time immediately raises the red flag of gentrification. But I often say that there are five neighborhoods in Philadelphia that have been hoping to gentrify in the last thirty years. There's kind of this New York or Chicago model of gentrification, where overheated gentrification in really hot cities destroys communities. But there are a heck of a lot of cities where gentrification happens over a period of thirty or forty years if it happens at all. Jane Jacobs talks about gradual versus cataclysmic change.² You've got to have slow change. If you don't have *any* change, the neighborhood's really in trouble. So the choice isn't between the way things have always been versus overnight change; the issue is, can you ensure that the process of neighborhood change has some duration?

RL: That's right.

MJS: In Philadelphia now there are places where people are saying, "We want a diverse neighborhood, and we're really going to build collectively to get that." But there are probably more neighborhoods

where it has just sort of happened. South Philly is the classic example. It used to be that South Philly was predominantly white, and if an African American family moved across the line into a white section, there would be a cross in front of their house or rocks through their windows. Then, over a fifteen-year period, the Asian American population started increasing. It wasn't like, "Oh, great, the Asians are here!" There was some tension, but changing it from a black-white issue to a three- or four-race issue complicated it enough that at least the first Asians weren't getting rocks through their window. They helped blur the boundary. Now we're working with an African American group on the traditionally African American side of South Philly. The folks who run the community arts center are Catholic, and their parish now is maybe 40 percent Vietnamese and 20 percent Mexican alongside the African American congregation, and it's stretching them.

RL: That's a really good point, that there is some middle ground between things staying the same and a total community makeover. I'm interested in creating a social collaboration to extend that period of transition to allow for all kinds of social dynamics in the process. I like the notion of the triangulation that occurred in South Philly with the introduction of the Asian Americans. Every place has to move on one way or another, whether it's through decay or some kind of positive growth experience. The key is just how we interact within that space of development.

MJS: Artists can't do everything, but they can help with diversity. They can complicate a process that comes with a lot of pressure to flatten and simplify. Like the tendency to just put the label on a "decaying" neighborhood. I think there is a fit between arts diversity and contemporary cities. A lot of the assumptions about what is valuable in a city and how to visualize a city are up for grabs now. It's a particularly important time for the role of art and artists in cities—not only because this makes for hot cities that rich people want to live in, but because all the residents of a city are looking to come up with new value, or value in different places. I think that this is a particular point in the history of American cities where the artists have the ability to challenge categories and provide a space where there can be ambiguity, where neighborhoods can be complicated. This seems like a unique moment. In Philadelphia up until fifteen years ago, if you tried to violate the color line, you were going to be sub-

ject to violence. And there's nothing like violence to uncomplicate an urban transition. But we're at a different point now, where people are willing to try out diversity, both intentionally and by happenstance, and that provides an opportunity for artists to be inserted into urban community life in a way that's really good for neighborhoods.

- RL: I've been working on this idea of what role artists and arts and cultural organizations should play in terms of community development. This is part of a project with Miguel Garcia at the Ford Foundation. Market developers' interest in community development is profit-driven. They don't care who gets served; they don't care who's paying. And then you have community development corporations, which do have an interest in who gets served by the development. Now, *Project Row Houses* has a CDC, but what role does it play? As an arts and cultural institution, *Project Row Houses* has the role of trying to look into what values come out of these developments from a human standpoint: What does the development project mean? The CDC says it needs to serve low-income populations, but what does it mean if a development serves low-income populations in relation to market development of high-end real estate? I want to explore what it means and create opportunities for meaningful dialogue. To me this is where arts and cultural institutions come in from a different angle.
- TF: Would you say that the diversity at *Project Row Houses* is partially created through collaboration? *Project Row Houses* has attracted all these different kinds of people who have different expertise, different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, et cetera. But even in this collaborative community spirit, all the vertical and horizontal interconnectivity, there is one person at the center who is particularly important as a catalyst for the interconnection. You are the instigator. It is usually one person who has the "aha" moment and then gives the opportunity to everybody else to be interconnected in all these different ways.
- RL: I think the way that a project develops will often look like the person who instigated it. If I had dropped out of *Project Row Houses*, or if I drop out in the future, the kind of diversity that it expresses will certainly shift. There would be different people with different notions of what kind of diversity is necessary.
- MJS: We've tried to emphasize that the networks operate on a differ-



Housing designed by Rice Building Workshop, Rice University School of Architecture, 2006. These buildings were designed by students and built as low-income rental housing. The low tan building at the far left is now the *Project Row Houses* Laundromat. Photograph by Danny Samuels. Courtesy of *Project Row Houses*.

ent level from organizations. *Project Row Houses* is a combination of what Rick brought to a situation, how Rick was embedded in social networks, and a certain kind of luck to pull it off. When you look at community arts projects in Philadelphia, I wouldn't say as a group they're successful all the time. Probably a third of them are in financial crisis right now, and a third of them are having arguments between the executive director and the artistic director. Someone once said to me that artists are good at dealing with adversity because 90 percent of the stuff you try is a failure, so you don't get discouraged easily. And one of the problems is that funders are not really interested in failures. So *Project Row Houses* is one success. In Philadelphia we have Lily Yeh—everyone knows Lily from the Village of Arts and Humanities, a community-based arts organization that she founded in 1986. She was a professor at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. The Village's mission was to use the arts as a strategy for community revitalization in the immediate neighborhood, which was a poor African American neighborhood in north Philadelphia. Her chief strategy was building public art installations and sculpture gardens in parks in the neighborhood. In a sense part of it is luck when you get a person, a setting, and resources coming

together to create a success. One of the drawbacks of this happening in the arts is that there's this notion of genius out there. We tend to take the geniuses and sort of draw a circle around them and say, "Wherever that person goes, there must be genius happening." But talent is just one of the ingredients.

TF: In fifth grade we were studying crystals, and one assignment was to make a supersaturated solution by adding lots of sugar to boiling water—more sugar than water can hold at room temperature. Then we put in a piece of string and let the solution return to room temperature. Sugar crystals formed on the string. This is a metaphor for what you're saying. If the situation is right, crystals form on the string. There would be no crystals without the string. So when the social situation is—

RL: Saturated with possibilities.

TF: —then if the right string goes in there, you get *Project Row Houses* or the Village.

MJS: And artists are occupationally trained to take risks. Rick and his collaborators saw the situation as a set of opportunities that an investment banker or someone working in the CDC wouldn't have seen. So the contribution of an artist in that situation, I think, has to do with seeing the world differently and also being a risk-taker of a certain kind.

TF: Yes, and it is important to stress how little people thought of the site of *Project Row Houses*. Far from recognizing a supersaturated solution of possibility, the establishment was getting ready to clear the site.

RL: I would also like to add that I think we live in a time and place in which, when you talk about art, you're talking about some kind of product—even in terms of community-based art. There needs to be a product to point to, whether it's a successful community-based project that's sustainable or a short-term project. But another part of me is rooted in this idea that there is a certain value in community-based projects that just explore and ask questions. That in itself can be a successful process that may not result in a product. It can allow questions to be put on the table that have not been asked before. It becomes, in its own way, art for art's sake—asking the questions for the questions' sake, not for the sake of the product. Would that satisfy a funder?

MJS: It's so funny, I find myself falling into the same role that traditional

art producers fall into sometimes — a role that I’m critical of — when they say, “Well, I can’t explain it; that’s for the critics. I just make the work.” So here I am saying kind of the same thing, “Well, I just want to go through this process and do it. I can’t explain it” [*laughs*].

We got started on our work in reaction to the economic impact of the arts movement that was trying to reduce all of the value of the arts to the multiplier effect in terms of restaurants and tourism. We were saying that this flattened the arts, didn’t take into account the depths of art’s potential for transforming communities and improving the social environment generally. I think as you get a feel for that depth, you can actually come up with ways of measuring that allow you to represent it to a wider population. You’re self-consciously trying to say you can do a community arts project that has a social mission, but also an aesthetic, emotional aim. *Project Row Houses* has that kind of depth, and I find that really impressive. Maybe part of the artist’s thing is to have strands that you’re always trying to pull together in the right form. And the challenge is, how do you, at a particular moment, pull them all together in a way that really works? I always wonder why one person can write one great novel and then eight bad novels. When all of those things fall into place, you have something wonderful. When I hear you reflect on Biggers’s paintings, there’s a sense of ambition that isn’t something you can reduce to a twenty-slide PowerPoint presentation. That’s part of the cultural challenge in terms of how you relate to the community development types. If you lay that out in particular settings, they’ll say, “Oh, God, we have an artist in here! Why are we talking to this artist?”

RL: I have heard that IKEA determines a price for a product, and then they have their designers design to that price. You know, to make sure that the product is affordable. Anybody can design something nobody can afford. So put the economics first. And when most people engage in a discussion of value — not just in the arts but in other community work too — it starts from the notion of economic impact. At the beginning I wasn’t smart enough or educated enough to know that that’s what I was supposed to do with *Project Row Houses*. One of the challenges is to know that in reality economics is a big part of it, but to not allow that to guide the development of the work, to keep other principles at the forefront. Oftentimes too a lot of the creativity is spun out in resistance to the economics, because

you can't afford the standard way so you have to do it differently. And those spin-offs are really where the juicy, exciting stuff happens, for me.

TF: Mark, you have said that using an economic model for these arts organizations isn't often the most apt, that it's more like a social movement.

MJS: Sure. The dominant model that's used to judge organizational success in the arts conforms to orthodox organizational standards like economic stability, successful marketing, clarity of the staff organization, and stability or moderate growth. A social movement model, on the other hand, is built around the motivation of people involved in the group. In fact we've called a lot of these community-based arts organizations "irrational organizations," because they lack those more orthodox benchmarks of well-being, but they essentially make up for that in the motivation and engagement of the staff and the participants. It's our experience in working with arts organizations that these irrational assets are probably a better standard by which to judge their success than orthodox organizational standards.

Part of the reason we got into making this distinction was that there's a tendency on the part of policymakers and funders to think that unless an organization grows and becomes more orthodox, it's not succeeding. While growth and development are desirable outcomes for some organizations, that shouldn't be our only standard. If an organization is on mission and providing the services that were its goals, it doesn't have to meet these kinds of standards of growth and development—you know, a kind of upward-mobility model—to be judged a success.