



**Learning from Project Row Houses,  
November 16, 2007, Harvard Graduate School of Design  
With a special screening of *Third Ward TX***

**Project Row Houses (PRH) Today**

PRH was inspired by the work of Dr. John Biggars, which dealt with historic architectural forms, and themes relating to the African-American community. Biggars work led to looking at the architecture of the row house as a window into community building.

Project Row Houses has developed around several themes, some of which relate back to Dr. Biggars work:

1. The value of good and relevant architecture:
  - The architectural basis of PRH is the row house.
  - The architectural framework of PRH extends to include historic structures of importance in the life and history of the community.
  - PRH is continuing to develop new structures which relate to the PRH architectural history and social context.
2. Art, creativity and culture:
  - In the PRH context these themes are considered a central and natural part of every person's life.
  - Emphasis at PRH is not just on the creation of formal, "curatorial" pieces, but on informal art—things that are created every day, often using found materials that are part of the everyday life of the community.
  - Programs and installations celebrate the history of the African American experience through art, and thus create increased awareness, community pride, and new models of what is possible.
3. Building community through education:
  - PRH uses education informally throughout all activities.
  - PRH is centered on the creation and sustaining of a viable community in the Third Ward;
  - Central themes in this community are: the importance of extended family; the value of shared wisdom among older and younger community members, and the importance of people caring for each other.
4. Creating and sustaining a social safety net for community members:
  - PRH values programs that help community members stay on productive paths in their lives. This runs through hiring policies; the young mothers program; after school programs; and gallery installations. Everything PRH does is with an eye toward empowering and supporting members of the community.
  - (Historically there was no homelessness as households would expand to accommodate extended family members. PRH seeks to strengthen this community pattern.)

## 5. Economic sustainability

- PRH works to create economic sustainability both for the community and for individual members of the community. These efforts take many forms:
  - Running successful programs that generate income and strengthen the community (e.g. after-school programs);
  - Supporting community members in developing their own skills in the creation or marketing of art or the pursuit of other work;
  - Developing businesses in the community that will serve community needs and provide opportunity for community members;
  - Helping community members receive the training and support required to allow them to take advantage of future opportunities.

The challenges in sustaining these values throughout PRH's programs and development are many:

- The speed with which physical change occurs in the neighborhood. Development pressures are intensifying at a rapid rate, often not leaving time for PRH to respond to the issues it wants to get involved in—e.g. demolition of an historic African American church before PRH knew it was for sale.
- Strategies are needed for land acquisition and protecting the environment of PRH, i.e. Third Ward generally. Options include the use of Tax Increment Refinance Zones (TIRZ); monies for affordable housing; working more closely with local developers to get designs and measures that might benefit PRH; arranging first right of refusal with homeowners.
- In architecture, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of historic structures, as symbols of community history, as testimony to the richness of community history, and on historic preservation as a way to preserve historic context for the neighborhood. The challenge is how to carry the language of the “shotgun house” into contemporary design.
- The Third Ward was historically separate from other parts of the city and the country. This had advantages—the world would come there, e.g. many great African American artists and performers came to the Third Ward for performances, and many great African-American political leaders came there as well, yet the community was able to retain a separate identity.
- In art, creativity and culture PRH is filling in a gap between “bringing the world to the people of the Third Ward” and giving community members the training they need to take advantage of opportunities beyond the Third Ward. Many artists find their own way to create within the community through personal connections.
- The purpose of PRH educational programs is to expose young kids so they can use their training and education to take advantage of opportunities beyond the Third Ward, and also to keep them out of trouble. The program uses artistic training as a way to learn how to deal with life's choices.

- In thinking of PRH as a social service network as well as an art-based project, a major challenge becomes the building of organizational capacity to provide services for the broader Third Ward residents, beyond the immediate neighborhood. How do they do this? What kind of organization is needed to serve this broader group?
- In economic development, challenges arise around how to develop small business and even micro-enterprise in ways that give people the services they need to live comfortably within their neighborhoods, and at the same time provide opportunity for small business entrepreneurs within and outside of PRH. What the best way to accomplish this? (e.g. laundry)

### **Discussion Groups:**

Discussions centered on how to use the film, *Third Ward TX*, to showcase a project built on community values, and to promote productive discussion and awareness of the many social and economic issues raised in the film.

- It would be great to show the film to artists. It presents a good model of artists as activists—showing artists engaged in the issues.
- The film shows the power of individuals reaching out to the community, and the importance of doing what works for the Third Ward community specifically.
- The film shows in a powerful way that if you knew at the beginning what you were getting into you wouldn't do it, but by getting engaged incrementally you can end up accomplishing things beyond your imagination.
- The film helps raise and embody questions about how to combine development pressures with local preservation—how to bring them into closer alignment.
- The film raises the question of how to fully understand what is desirable in terms of models for development? Use the film to show that there are different concepts of development and community that can be instructive.
- Use the film to illustrate how community involvement really strengthens both community and quality of place .Often art is too rigidly defined to invite others in in the creation of art. PRH introduces a broader concept of art that is open to many in the community. This model would be of interest to artists and some developers.
- The film is useful in illustrating the ways in which artists are using social issues in creative expression, and in illustrating the power of arts that are fully integrated into a community.
- The film shows ordinary people making things and thus changing the world around them. Helps empower people in personal creativity. Shows a lot about building community—not just about the row houses, but about the nature of community as a living organism.

- It should be shown as part of *Pangea Day*, international on-line film festival for films that teach how to make the world a better place. Film deals with universal problems, relevant through cultures around the world: preservation vs. development is a universal issue.
- It should be shown to CDCs as an example of creating a place-based project. Is based upon local culture and vernacular. Ideas could be adapted in so many settings, and bringing artists to the table in the development process. It redefines common assumptions about “poverty” and “wealth”.
- It shows methods of increasing the visibility of a neighborhood, and reducing its isolation. It also builds on what is unique in Houston. The film demonstrates the power of finding, nurturing and polishing the hidden assets of a neighborhood. Boston could learn to build on what is local in the arts community. Projects should look different in each location, each community.
- Use the film as curriculum in schools—teaches about community, policy implications, and investment tools. Would like to be able to “take the film apart” and use different parts of it in addressing different issues. Show at Mayors Institute on City Design, and other organizations, but stop at crucial moments for discussion.
- The mixed economics of the neighborhood are a powerful tool for making things. Film would be helpful to other organizations (e.g. Detroit Community Arts Initiative) and to funders, to see the kinds of things funding can do.
- The film could help developers to see their work in a larger context. Much development work is lacking context. If developers could relate to a neighborhood context quality of work might improve.
- The film shows arts and culture as a powerful tool for peace building. Film and program are based upon respect for the innate creativity of the community, and for the knowledge base that is held among all community members.
- Film could be used to show what cultural work actually is; also shows the ethical dimension of development work.
- It would be useful in oral history work as well. Ref: “Long Night’s Journey into Day,” as similar type of film.
- Film would be good to show to Mayors at a Mayor’s Institute for City Design.
- Demonstrates “learning by design” and art as a learning approach.
- Film poses the question of how to use gentrification as a positive force. Lots of developers want to do the right thing, just need models for doing it.

- In the Third Ward there is an opportunity to harness a great deal of energy: gentrification and development process; TIRZ funds; local policy direction are all forces that could potentially help PRH. PRH should find ways to use these forces to their advantage; they exist in so many communities.
- The film shows the possibility of stretching the limits of community development and dealing in new ways with restraints.
- Policy implications need to be discussed.
- An important issue in cities and in conceiving of new projects is that we don't plan for success. It's important to believe we are going to make a miracle, and to plan for it. If you start out believing the project will be successful, will be possible to take advantage of more opportunities early on, e.g. low land costs prior to increased development pressure. Assume the impacts of your project, and act accordingly.

## **Organization, Development Environment, Architecture:**

### ***Organization***

- It is critical to maintain a balance between the visionary underpinnings of the project and a stable organization that can effectively implement the vision. It is important to get the systems into an organization without violating the spirit of the organizational culture.
- PRH is a magical place. They want to keep it that way, and at the same time develop an organizational structure that is professional and efficient. It is a challenge to create that structure without violating the "magical element."
- Want to remain transparent and inviting as an organization. Want to be the place where people share what's on their mind, and come to play dominoes on Saturday mornings and engage in informal interaction with the project. That kind of informal communication is crucial to understanding the community and directing programs to serve them.
- PRH is still at the early stages of developing the organization to address sophisticated accounting procedures; risk management and personnel policies. Need to become more professional without losing their transparency and accessibility to the community.
- PRH as an arts organization where "our canvas is our community."
- Leadership has to be constantly concerned with avoiding a disconnect with the community as the project grows and matures. Have to find ways to constantly reach out and invite the community in.
- Danger of "vision drift" as professionalism of organization increases. Need balance between including community in staff, and hiring professionals needed for certain functions. PRH must remain a vehicle for listening to the community—central to the mission.

### ***Board***

- Houston environment and its lack of zoning fuel the speculative environment, and undermines community development as land prices skyrocket.
- There is also a lot of capital in the Houston market (oil) that also contributes to speculation and inflation of property values.
- PRH has relied on the generosity of individuals to run the program, but are looking to stabilize revenues and create endowment.
- Houston is a young city; its infrastructure development is still emerging. Issues such as the lack of public transportation play a critical role for the project. PRH wants to make the Third Ward more accessible through improved public transportation.
- PRH now mature enough that it has a “seat at the table,” among quasi-governmental entities in the city.
- PRH wants to use TIRZ money to create additional affordable housing onsite.
- Long term challenges include how to provide a broad range of commercial services in the neighborhood for residents, so they don’t always have to go outside the neighborhood for everything. Also need to resolve some of the transportation challenges for the neighborhood.
- El Dorado Ballroom was the heart of the music scene historically. Want to continue its function as space for performance, music, meetings, and also create space for PRH offices.

### ***Architecture***

- Rice studio has used PRH as a venue for teaching “evolutionary” architecture as opposed to modernism. They are applying Lars Lerup’s adage “get the students of architecture out of the school and into the city.”
- Students have learned to understand importance of historic row house structures, and create designs that relate to them.
- Students learn about the “contingent” nature of this neighborhood, and learn to accept that you cannot always predict what will work.
- The work with Project Row Houses gives students of architecture the opportunity to practice humility.

## What we Learned

- Themes across speakers:
  - Need for flexibility moving forward;
  - Importance of retaining the ability to respond to opportunities as they arise;
  - Community as an organism that moves, changes, and is unpredictable; need to create organizational structure that can respond to the needs of the “organism.” This is harder but more like life.
- It is important to maintain an organization that is small enough to change and respond to the needs of the community, while at the same time maintaining professionalism and effectiveness.
- The purpose of PRH is to create a live context for a healthy community.
- PRH is based on the concept of NURTURE; don’t always know where that will take the organization. Important to reflect periodically on where you are going and on the growth and expansion of the organization.
- Core value of PRH is to create community through the circle of the arts, and through African-American history and culture.
- Another goal is to try and maintain fluidity and transparency about ethnic and economic mix within neighborhood.
- PRH is about creating community vs. creating commodity
- Maintaining TRUST among all PRH players is a key ingredient to future success.