

# Southeast Houston Arts Initiative

ACTIVITIES REPORT | STRATEGIC PLAN | EVALUATION ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

2011-2012

# THE EVALUATION

## CUTTING TEETH ON CREATIVE PLACEMAKING: Southeast Houston Arts Initiative Case Study

November, 2012

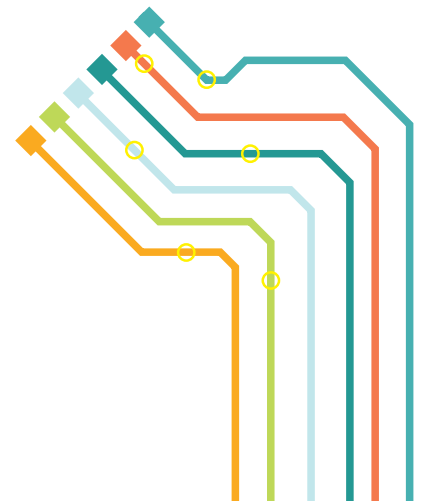
Anne Gadwa Nicodemus

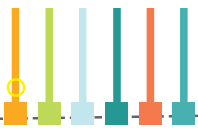


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### Acknowledgements

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## Executive Summary

The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative is a creative placemaking effort initiated by University of Houston research professor Carroll Parrott Blue with leadership funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. This evaluation explores a range of questions of interest to project stakeholders and the larger creative placemaking field. What initial impacts did it generate? What was most effective about the project? What challenges did it face and how were they met? What larger lessons can project organizers and others interested in launching or funding creative placemaking efforts draw from these experiences?

To address these questions, we integrated a range of methods. Through 22 one-on-one interviews and four focus groups, we queried over 30 participants who ranged from paid consultants to representatives of partner organizations and government officials to community residents. We surveyed participants in the initiative's public events, reviewed project documents, toured and photographed the area, and drew on ongoing informal phone and email updates with project organizers.

So that readers can better understand impacts and lessons learned, we provide background on the local geographic context, characterize the initiative's major activities and outcomes, describe the people and institutions involved, and document how and why the project's scope shifted over time:

The absence of comprehensive zoning and a complicated system with numerous public authorities and layers of government influence Houston's land use decisions. Before the initiative, Southeast Houston was unnamed and it still lacks a widely recognized identity of place. African-Americans make up a majority of residents, with a growing younger Latino population. It faces a confluence of major infrastructure and development projects. The opportunity to coordinate and enhance these developments motivated the project organizers' efforts.

In its initial year, a staggering number of activities fell under the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative umbrella, but at its core was a strategic planning process with a heavy emphasis on collaborative learning and community engagement. The resulting plan advances "healthy connectivity" through a bike/hike trail that links area assets, new spaces for cultural programming, and art and media installations. Concurrently, the plan supported the development of three pilot artwork installations at the Park at Palm Center and the adjacent community garden, with installations anticipated for early 2013. These include a simple outdoor kitchen with educational panels and links to online games; a solar art shed, which provides secure equipment storage and a site for an interactive solar-powered sound/video installation that promotes vegetable gardening; and *Community Print Path*, which (pending approval and funding allocation) will feature impressions of community members' footprints and links to audio recorded memories, hopes, and experiences of the area.

A number of individuals and organizations shaped the initiative and contributed resources. Carroll Parrott Blue, a research professor at the University of Houston and filmmaker launched the effort. The University of Houston and City of Houston were the official lead institutional partners. The University contributed \$150,000 of in-kind staff and salary expenses. Faculty comprised key project contributors, though no administrators championed or institutionalized the initiative. A number of city officials and agencies lent support and involvement in different capacities, but Minnette Boesel, the mayor's assistant for cultural affairs, became the strongest champion within the city. Two paid consultants, residents active in the leadership of civic clubs, and volunteer architects and an IT expert comprised the core working group. Dozens of other institutions and agencies participated, some by collaborating on discrete events, others through representation on the steering/stakeholder committee.

The project's scope shifted considerably over time. Some changes were responses to factors outside of organizers' control. Reductions in funding and shifts in partners' geographic focus prompted Blue to scale back the project's geographic focus and concentrate on a strategic planning process and production of one pilot artwork, as opposed to the over 30 artwork sites listed in the original proposal. Other shifts were the result of iterative learning. An influential visit by placemaking expert, Maurice Cox, prompted a shift from providing artist trainings to broader listening sessions that would allow community members and arts and design professionals to holistically view the area. One interviewee characterized the year's work as "an intention to listen and find the project." Community explorations revealed an interest in health, wellness, and nutrition, which informed the plan's theme of "healthy connectivity." The passions and interests of project leadership also contributed to shifts in the project's scope. Blue's interests in holistic connections was one reason why, ultimately, the project area expanded back out beyond the Park at Palm Center's immediate vicinity to include linkages and connections to other area assets.

What were the initial impacts of these activities? Interview and survey findings suggest that the planning process helped expand the way a range of Houstonians think about art, design, and the possibilities of creative placemaking. By encouraging residents to help shape their own environment, it deepened civic engagement. Lastly, it fostered interaction among community members by breaking down institutional and professional/lay-person silos.

The artwork development provided University of Houston students and faculty and an emerging artist with valuable and unique experience in the public art realm. The demonstration platform has already sparked interest in incorporating simple outdoor kitchens in other community gardens, and provides park users with a custom enhancement far below cost. Once installed, the artworks' anticipated impacts include increasing community member's sense of investment in the park,



promoting gardening and nutrition, and providing compelling, interactive hubs for the park and community garden.

The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative brought to bear a range of strengths, and numerous interviewees attested to its most effective offerings. The project initiator's determined nature, resourcefulness, and ability to connect people and cultivate new opportunities greatly enhanced the project. By connecting Southeast Houston to inspiring thinkers and practices from across the country, organizers both broadened individuals' perspectives and strengthened their own approach to the planning process. A sincere commitment to community empowerment helped catalyze the initial civic engagement impacts and ensure that the resulting strategic plan reflects community values. The initiative's most widely lauded offering was a participatory community celebration that provided residents with multiple, creative platforms to voice their ideas for Southeast Houston's past, present, and future. Lastly, organizers expressed pride that the strategies proposed in their plan both reflect the community driven themes of healthy connectivity, and outline ways in which planned physical developments can be enhanced.

A myriad of challenges tested the initiative. First, project organizers struggled to align ambitions and financial resources. They scaled back the project scope when the NEA awarded only 40 percent of the amount they requested. Blue simultaneously solicited additional funds from individual donors. Secondly, the initiative faced serious challenges around communication. Interviewees voiced that project objectives had not been clearly conveyed and that crucial communication pieces came online late or were missing entirely. The project's shifting scope, limited financial resources, and the organizers' individual communication strengths and weaknesses all contributed to these shortcomings. Community engagement presented another area that challenged project organizers. Despite success engaging certain resident groups, the initiative had less success involving Latinos, renters, and youth. Engagement efforts experienced other unique hurdles – a lack of passion for the Park at Palm Center, difficulties providing tangible outcomes to sustain interest, and challenges making the case for art or creative placemaking amidst pressing infrastructure and economic needs. Project organizers also faced difficulty clarifying and funding artists' roles and sustaining their involvement. In addition, they experienced mixed success leveraging institutional partners and stakeholders. Although organizers made strides cultivating the support of key public agencies and property owners in the project area, some critical relationships also frayed. Some members of the steering committee perceived that the project's scope deviated too far from what initially attracted their involvement and/or failed to see the community engagement process as legitimate. Lastly, the initiative faces challenges around implementation. Core working group members are actively grappling with questions of who will drive the plan forward and what their capacity assets and limitations may be.

Reflecting on these challenges, we offered project organizers six recommendations for moving forward, detailed in the main report:

1. Fundraising: develop infrastructure and don't just "follow the money"
2. Invest in skilled communicators and communication tools
3. Redress community engagement "holes" with Latinos, renters, and youth
4. Clarify what unique value artists bring to the initiative and pair with commensurate resources
5. Nurture key relationships and cultivate new allies
6. Advance implementation by finding a viable leadership structure

We also drew on our analysis of the initiative's process, strengths, and challenges to develop lessons learned for the broader field of creative placemaking funders and practitioners:

- Initiators: move beyond make or break
- Attracting political will: balance the holistic and specific
- Tell your story clearly, often, and through multiple modes
- Offer hands-on generative activities throughout
- Partnerships: invest in thorough, upfront explorations
- Keep the creative in creative placemaking
- Support opportunities for field building

To elaborate, leaders initiate projects and their unique strengths (and shortcomings) heavily influence its direction. Before investing in a project, funders may wish to establish probes to gauge the attributes of individual leaders. Project initiators should attempt self-assessments to attract talent to augment their own skill sets.

To successfully build political will, projects must strive for an effective balance between the holistic and specific. Projects must be broad enough to attract diverse stakeholders but be discrete enough that supporters see objectives as achievable and know what they are rallying around.

Creative placemakers should not underestimate the importance of clear and consistent communication and take advantage of multiple modes of dissemination. By doing so, projects can build more momentum and widen interest and participation, whereas the absence stymies efforts.

For planning efforts, include hands-on, generative activities throughout. These platforms fuel excitement and are effective means for participants to substantively influence content and direction.

Sustaining collaborations and partnerships presents inherent challenges; creative placemakers who invest time, up-front, to clarify objectives and make sure that all key partners are on the same page about roles and expectations, maximize their chances for success.

By definition, creative placemaking efforts are rooted in arts and culture. Those wishing to launch creative placemaking efforts should engage in candid dialogues, early on, to clarify artists and/or arts and cultural activities' unique value and then pair with commensurate resources.

Lastly, creative placemaking practitioners hunger for opportunities to learn from one another's experiences. Funders should consider increasing support for field building

opportunities including convenings, webinars, and written case studies.

In conclusion, though just one window, this evaluation considerably advances understanding of the range of dynamics that underpin creative placemaking efforts. Funders and creative placemaking practitioners can draw on these lessons learned to inform their work. Locally, the initiative's organizers are now empowered with new insights on initial impacts, what they did most effectively, and opportunities for improvement. Time will tell to what degree the plan's strategies are implemented and long-term livability objectives are met, but we look forward to watching the momentum build.

## Introduction

### ■ Evaluation Objectives

This evaluation analyzes and shares lessons learned through the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative, a creative placemaking effort initiated by University of Houston research professor Carroll Parrott Blue, with leadership funding provided through a National Endowment for the Arts Our Town grant. For those unfamiliar with the term creative placemaking, it is a process through which cross-sector partners strategically shape a place's social or physical character around arts and cultural assets.<sup>1</sup> As advanced by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), creative placemaking's objectives are to promote community "livability," which includes improving quality of life, encouraging creative activity, creating community identity and a sense of place, and revitalizing local economies.<sup>2</sup> The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative was one of only 51 recipients of the inaugural Our Town grants.

This research addresses a range of questions of importance to Southeast Houston Arts Initiative stakeholders (project organizers, area residents, organizational and governmental partners, and funders) and those interested in launching or funding other creative placemaking projects in Houston or across the country. What were the initiative's initial impacts? What has been most effective about the process? How did organizers and participants meet challenges and how can they prepare for those ahead? The University of Houston, with funding from the NEA, commissioned Metris Arts Consulting to conduct this evaluation. Through it, the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative hopes to achieve three objectives:

1. Analyze and share lessons learned, so that the effort can serve as a model for other creative placemaking efforts in Houston and nationally
2. Enhance its capacity to garner resources for continued work
3. Meet the NEA reporting requirements on outcomes and measurements.

As committed critical self-learners, project organizers sincerely want to understand what they did effectively and

<sup>1</sup> Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, *Creative Placemaking*, White Paper (Washington, D.C.: Mayors' Institute On City Design, National Endowment for the Arts, 2010), <http://www.nea.gov/pub/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "Our Town," Grants: Apply for a Grant, n.d., <http://www.nea.gov/grants/apply/OurTown/index.html>.

how they can improve their work moving forward. When they embarked on this project, the practice of creative placemaking felt like uncharted territory, so they sought out resources to inform and strengthen their work and decided, in turn, to share their experience with others. This evaluation is a companion piece to the initiative's creative placemaking strategic plan, *Pathways to Southeast Houston's Future*. Whereas the plan lays out a vision and strategies for Southeast Houston and celebrates the year's accomplishments, this case study thoroughly investigates impacts to date, how outcomes were accomplished, and larger lessons.

### ■ Methods

To develop our findings, we integrated a range of methods. We interviewed and conducted focus groups with a broad range of stakeholders. We surveyed event participants, reviewed project documentation, and toured and photographed the project area. We also drew from ongoing informal phone and email updates with project leaders.

Thirty-one different individuals informed our findings through 22 one-on-one interviews and four focus groups. These included paid consultants, artists, and core volunteer working group members (community residents, architects, and other professionals). We also interviewed members of the steering/stakeholders committee, such as representatives from partner organizations and government officials. We reached out to known critics, as well as supporters. For a complete list of interviewees and their affiliations, see Appendix A: Interview and Focus Group Participants. To provide the initiative with real-time feedback, we conducted six of the interviews and two focus groups in March 2012. We produced an internal summary of findings so that organizers could strengthen their approach mid-process. The majority of interviews and two remaining focus groups occurred in July 2012, closely following dissemination of the summary version of the strategic plan.

Through a survey to participants in the initiative's public events, we solicited feedback on what motivated and discouraged attendance, the degree to which events advanced the plan's objectives, strengths and weaknesses in terms of public participation and content, and ideas for improvement. For full survey results and response rates, see Appendix B: Survey on Southeast Houston Arts Initiative Public Events.

Our document review included the grant applications to the NEA, mid-process update documents, drafts of the strategic plan, press coverage, and event fliers.

This report first introduces the project with background on its local context, main objectives and activities, protagonists and stakeholders, and critical shifts in the process. We next summarize the initiative's initial impacts. An in-depth process evaluation follows, in which we critically examine the project's strengths and challenges. We offer recommendations specific to the initiative and draw out key-takeaways for the broader field of creative placemaking funders and practitioners. Lastly, we summarize our findings and conclusions.

## Background

To illuminate the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative, we explore its local context, main activities and outcomes, the people and institutions that fueled the initiative, and the ways in which its scope shifted over time and why. By providing this foundation, readers will better be able to interpret the initiative's impacts and lessons learned.

### ■ Context: Houston and a Place Without a Name

Place is central to the operating definition of creative placemaking. All cities are unique, but one Houstonian reported, with almost obstinate pride, that what “works” in Los Angeles or Philadelphia will not work in Houston. It's the fourth largest city in the U.S. and the largest without comprehensive zoning. The alternative system of land use regulations, and legal covenants, often results in incongruous architectural forms and land uses occurring cheek by jowl across Houston's flat, low-lying cityscape. Steve Spillette, who coordinated the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative planning process, explained that Houstonians aren't used to thinking about public space and that a rapid tear down and rebuild mentality results in few historic buildings.

“Oil runs this city's economy” is how Professor Blue, who initiated and led the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative, characterized Houston's economic base. In addition to the energy sector, the massive Texas Medical Center constitutes a city within a city, with its own impressive skyline. However, a new study commissioned by Houston Arts Alliance and the University of Houston reveals that Houston has a sizable and growing, though often overlooked, creative economy. They found that Houston's creative economy employs more people than Texas Medical Center. Between 2001 and 2011, Houston also saw larger creative-sector job growth than the Dallas, Miami, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles metropolitan areas.<sup>3</sup>

A number of fragmented public authorities and layers of government influence land use – the strong mayor/city controller system in city hall and its public works, planning and development, and parks and recreations departments; the redevelopment authorities charged with administering tax increment reinvestment funds; management districts that use commercial property assessment funds to provide services; and METRO, which is currently constructing the six mile Southeast Light Rail line. At the sub-city level, the city is carved into nine city-council districts. Citizens organize through a system of civic associations, and neighborhood and super neighborhood organizations.

Nestled within this complex, and uniquely Houston, context is the creative placemaking local project area. Southeast Houston lies about three miles southeast of Houston's central business district, with the major institutions of the University of Houston and Texas Southern University falling between. Rice University and Texas Medical Center are also south of the central business district, but are west of Southeast

<sup>3</sup> EMSI, *The Creative Economy of Houston: A Comprehensive Study of Creative-Sector Industries and Their Impact on the Houston Economy* (Houston Arts Alliance and University of Houston, July 2012), [http://www.houstonartsalliance.com/images/uploads/documents/The\\_Creative\\_Economy\\_of\\_Houston.pdf](http://www.houstonartsalliance.com/images/uploads/documents/The_Creative_Economy_of_Houston.pdf).

Houston. Until recently, Southeast Houston was a place without a name. Much to the chagrin of local residents, Houstonians unfamiliar with the area often conflate it with the Third Ward neighborhood, which lies to the northwest. One planning process participant explained that the name Southeast Houston had to be invented for the project because there was never any clear label before, due to lack of attention. Palms Center, Houston's first shopping mall is still many community members' predominant association with Southeast Houston, although its heyday only spanned the 1950s and 60s.

Interviewees currently characterize Southeast Houston as being primarily populated by older African-Americans with a growing, younger Latino population. A demographic analysis prepared by Spillette from 2010 Census and 2006-2010 American Community Survey data supports these observations. In the Census Tracts most closely approximating the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative project area boundary, 83 percent of households are black, with Hispanic-headed households comprising 8.5 percent. Renter and owner households are split nearly 50/50, and over 40 percent of owner-occupied households were headed by



Sample Southeast Houston housing stock. Photos courtesy of Emily Peacock/TLC2.





Panorama of Park at Palm Center and the adjacent Palm Center. Photo courtesy of Raul Baez.



Figure 1  
Map of Key Arts Opportunity Sites.  
Map courtesy of the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative.

blacks aged 65 or older. Southeast Houston's housing stock ranges from high-end, to post-war ranches (some well maintained and some dilapidated), to custom architect designed (see photos). Southeast Houston currently tracks below the city in terms of income; nearly 60 percent of all households earn less than \$40,000, with 37.3 percent earning under \$20,000, whereas Houston's overall median income is \$42,962. See pages 25-27 for detailed demographic charts and data. Project stakeholders anticipate that the socio-economic composition of the area's residents may shift due to impending physical developments.

Southeast Houston is now in the throws of a number of major infrastructure and land use changes (see Figure 1). METRO's new Southeast Light rail line will terminate at Palm Center (now anchored by a non profit dedicated to supporting small businesses). Two new schools, a library branch, and a YMCA have also recently been constructed or will imminently break ground. Streetscaping projects are on the docket for portions of Old Spanish Trail and Griggs Road. Southeast Houston also hosts a brand-new urban park, the Park at Palm Center.<sup>4</sup> The convergence of these major, yet previously uncoordinated, investments proved to be a primary motivation for the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative planning effort.

#### ■ Southeast Houston Arts Initiative: What Was It?

Over the course of the year, an incredible breadth of activities occurred under the auspices of the Southeast Houston Arts

Initiative. Off the top of her head, Blue recounted, "We had a survey. We organized groups. We did listening sessions, workshops, field trips, an art installation in a community garden, a park art installation, a wildflower field." When asked to characterize the core activities of the Southeast Arts Initiative, participants from a focus group of actively involved community representatives jokingly replied, "Meetings. We had lots and lots of meetings."

The major focus of the year's activities involved a grass-roots process to develop a creative placemaking strategic plan for the area. A series of six "listening" sessions provided local community members and arts and design professionals with opportunities to learn from key area stakeholders about topics ranging from parks and bayous, to economic development and housing, to community and educational institutions. Three seminars connected participants to leading national thinkers on placemaking and other innovative approaches to architecture and design. A survey of over 300 people helped prioritize the themes of health education, nutrition and wellness for the Park at Palm Center's future use and the larger strategic plan. Small delegations traveled to California, New York City, and Baltimore to soak up innovative approaches to placemaking featured at



Celebration Sign-in.  
Photos courtesy of Emily Peacock/TLC2.

<sup>4</sup> Although the shopping mall was called Palms Center, it has been renamed Palm Center.



Scenes from the Community Celebration Event, May 2012. Photos courtesy of Emily Peacock/TLC2. Collage by Carroll Parrott Blue.



Maurice Cox seminar with the Artist and New Media and Design Professionals working groups, November 2011. Photo courtesy of Patrick Peters.



Flood Disaster Community Meeting, January 2012. Photo courtesy of Patrick Peters.



Chef Tarsha Gary tours University of Houston students through community garden. Photo courtesy of Patrick Peters.

conferences, seminars, and workshops. Through local field trips, participants toured area community gardens, Brays Bayou, and the Park at Palm Center and Palm Center, which provided them with a more concrete understanding of the project area and potential assets and connections to explore. To provide a foundation of knowledge to support the future development and revitalization of the area, a historic preservation consultant prepared reports and presentations on the histories of MacGregor Park and Palm Center. Tiers of working groups informed and guided the process and also offered platforms for citizens and art and design professionals to actively collaborate. The process culminated in a much beloved community celebration. Residents shared their thoughts on the Southeast Houston's past, present, and future through activities that ranged from video interviews, to scans of family heirlooms, to discussions that used large-scale maps as focal points. Through a charrette process closely following the event, a team of artists, designers, and core community participants synthesized the ideas generated during the celebration.

Southeast Houston Arts Initiative's creative placemaking strategic plan, *Pathways to Southeast Houston's Future*, represents the major output of these broad ranging activities. Under an overarching theme of "healthy connectivity," it proposes a new bike/hike trail that would connect Southeast Houston's three parks and two planned light rail stops and METRO bus connections; new spaces for cultural programming including a farmer's market and art fair; and art and media installations that are educational, culturally relevant, and/or extend the experience into the digital/virtual realm with QR codes and web/social media tie-ins.

The connections and relationships fostered through the planning process also helped catalyze a number of spinoff projects, some of which were also financially supported through Southeast Arts Initiative funding. For instance, the Houston chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architects (HNOMA) recently sponsored two one-week art and architecture workshops for youth enrolled in the YMCA's





BayouVoices workshop participants. Photo courtesy of Johnny Hanson.

summer program. Keiji Asakura, the landscape architect for the Park at Palm Center, is open to trying to incorporate elements of the youth designs into the park. In addition, through collaboration with the Houston Advanced Research Center (HARC), 15 youth, adults, and educators from both Southeast Houston and the Third Ward neighborhoods came together for a three-day digital media workshop. Through digital storytelling, photography, object scanning, and community mapping, participants generated content for BayouVoices ([www.bayouvoices.org](http://www.bayouvoices.org)), a student-led community blog set to debut in Fall 2012.

Running in tandem to the planning process were efforts to produce pilot project artwork installations at the Park at Palm Center. However, with actual installations to occur in early 2013, community members and other stakeholders were less aware of these efforts.

The Southeast Arts Initiative leveraged personal and institutional relationships and/or contributed funding to support the development of three discrete pilot pieces:

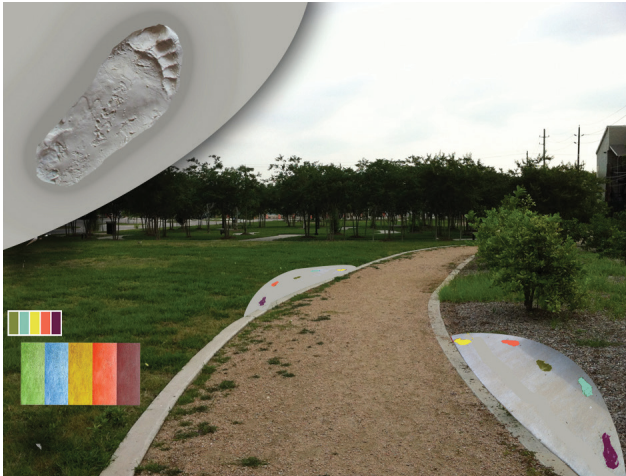
University of Houston architecture and graphics communication faculty and students worked collaboratively to produce a shade structure/demonstration platform and educational panels and online games (see image). The platform will function as a simple outdoor kitchen, a hub for the community garden adjacent to the Park at Palm Center. Panel signage promotes gardening and nutrition with cohesive graphic elements. Posted URLs and QR codes will link to student-designed educational games on gardening, nutrition, and healthy eating.

Architecture professor Patrick Peters and his collaborators also received a separate opportunity to develop the Sun-Stop Para-Sol Solar Art Shed, which will securely store the demonstration platform's counters and fridge when not in use. Solar panels and water harvesting will demonstrate environmentally sustainable practices. The shed provides a site for an interactive, solar-powered sound/video installation, designed by graphics communication professors Cheryl Beckett and Beckham Dossett. Through whimsical animation and imaginative collage, six videos will each illustrate an aspect of vegetable gardening.



Rendering of the demonstration platform and storage shed to be installed at the Park at Palm Center Community Garden. Image courtesy of Raul Baez.





Rendering of *Community Print Path*, proposed artwork at the Park at Palm Center. Photo credit: © Carrie Schneider 2012.

Lastly, the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative provided a modest stipend for artist Carrie Schneider to develop an interactive art proposal, and has pledged \$9,500 to OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority towards its installation. The proposal is still awaiting the redevelopment authority's final approval. The planned *Community Print Path* would feature community members' footprints, along with writings or durable objects they wish to contribute, imprinted in concrete waveforms along a path in the Park at Palm Center. Each wave would be stamped with the URL for the companion website, [HearOurHouston.com](http://HearOurHouston.com). The website would feature those community members' audio recorded memories, hopes, and experiences of the area and invitations and instructions on how to contribute one's own audio tour.

### ■ The Players

A number of individuals and organizations shaped the initiative and contributed resources. Blue donned the mantle of the visionary initiator. As a research professor in the University of Houston's Center for Public History, an interactive multimedia producer, and an award winning filmmaker, Blue might appear to be an unlikely champion for a local creative placemaking project. However, her intellectual curiosity and sincere desire to improve her surrounding community propelled her into the role. Professor Blue learned of the Our Town grant opportunity and rapidly pulled together an ambitious proposal with numerous partners. The Southeast Houston Art's Initiative's financial partners included The University of Houston (UH), OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority, and the Dawn Project (Blue's 501c3 organization), with the University of Houston and the City of Houston named as the lead partners.

UH was the official lead partner on the NEA's grant application and administered the grant funds. Overall, the University contributed close to \$150,000 in funds and in-kind staff and salary expenses. This included Blue's salary, office space, and graphic design and editorial support. Beyond Blue, other instrumental contributors to the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative were also UH faculty, including Patrick

Peters, Cheryl Beckett, Sibylle Hagmann, and Jose Baez-Franceschi. One research professor's initiative, therefore, broke down silos within the University and catalyzed collaboration between faculty and administrators in the Center for Public History, College of Architecture, and School of Art. The Provost's Office, as well as deans and directors of individual colleges and centers, coordinated the University's formal institutional involvement. Some key project collaborators perceived this as quite limited. Spillette explains that UH was a partner primarily by means of individual professors' interests. Patrick Peters, who also works on the UH master plan, explained that as a larger institution, "The University of Houston really didn't play a role in this case. Carroll really did it through writing the grant. The University was willing to not get in the way." Relative freedom from additional layers of bureaucracy may have helped motivated professors reach their accomplishments. Through an end-of-process assessment, however, Blue newly recognized the full extent of UH's financial and in-kind support, which she credited as a major factor in the initiative's success. For instance, support from a high-ranking university administrator and the Texas Learning and Computation Center leveraged additional funds and may have resulted in a sustained, long-term commitment to the project. Only through future comparative case studies will we be able to infer whether the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative had relatively limited formal institutional support, and the degree to which that affects successful outcomes.

The City of Houston lent support and involvement through a variety of capacities and roles. Through the city's digital inclusion initiative, the Park at Palm Center should soon be a free public WiFi hotspot. Elected officials track the project and increase their involvement when the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative dovetails with their own policy agenda. For example, Mayor Annise Parker sent an enthusiastic email after viewing a BayouVoices video. Councilmember Wanda Adams has expressed interest in the farmers' market concept, because of synergies with her work to support food banks and expand access to nutritious food. Councilmember Adams' office maintains representation on the project's stakeholders' committee, as does the department of parks and recreation. However, the city's strongest champion was Minnette Boesel, the mayor's assistant for cultural affairs. She sat on the steering/stakeholders committee and provided extensive feedback on draft communication pieces and the plan itself, including conveying standard conventions for policy makers (bullet points, succinct language, etc.). She introduced the project to key players in city government, including the chief economic advisor to the mayor, who she describes as "the rainmaker" for Houston. Unfortunately, the in-kind support that Boesel and Blue originally envisioned that the city's planning department would provide never manifested, due to severe departmental budget cuts. As Spillette sums up, "Officially naming the City of Houston as a partner is a work in progress, but I'm hopeful."

When asked to reflect on the most important lessons learned, without missing a beat Blue replied, "People are the most important element in the whole process." The core team

that Carroll assembled included two paid consultant support staff – Steve Spillette, an independent urban planner who had distinguished himself by crafting a detailed vision plan for Houston that the city council unanimously voted to enact, and Gwen Fedrick, a retired METRO employee with extensive ties to the area and connections to small businesses. A small group of area residents – Paulette Wagner, Preston Roe, multiple generations of the Cotton family, Dr. Teddy McDavid, and Wilbert Taylor – dedicated extensive time to act as stewards of the project. Many of them lead civic associations or neighborhood groups and helped link the initiative to broader constituents. Architects and an IT expert engaged as ongoing volunteer thought partners and lent their technical expertise. They include Patrick Peters, an energetic University of Houston architecture professor, and Keji Asakura, the highly respected local landscape architect responsible for the Park at Palm Center’s design. Krist Bender, director of information technology and social media for HARC, developed the project’s website and spearheaded BayouVoices. Cedric Douglas, a young local architect and University of Houston alum, coordinated a revamped outreach effort to artists and designers this spring.

The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative also involved dozens of other institutions and agencies in a range of capacities. Some collaborated on discrete initiatives and events, including the Houston Arts Alliance, landscape architecture firm Asakura Robinson, Social Agency Lab, HARC, Houston Texan’s YMCA, HNOMA, the Bayou Preservation Association, spoken word group METAFour, and Jack Yates High School. Houston Business Development, Inc, owner of the Palm Center complex, donated countless hours of free meeting and event space. Steering/stakeholders committee members received project updates and assumed advisory roles, with the hope that they will actively support the plan’s recommendations. Representation included community members and key public agencies that own or operate the spaces where

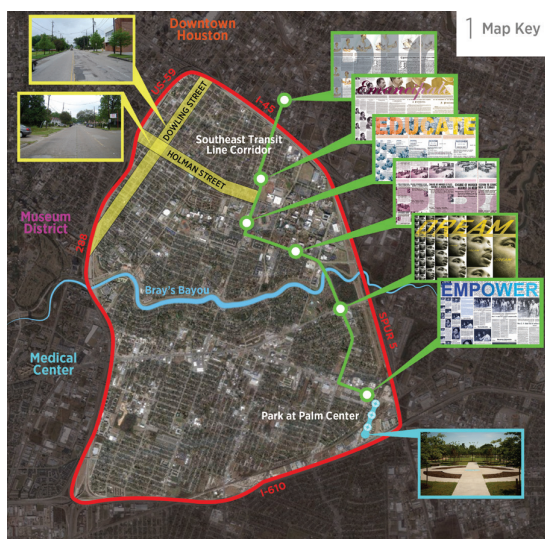


Figure 1 (Refer to page 35)

The final project area (right), is about two-thirds that of the original (left) and omits the historic Third Ward neighborhood to the northwest. Maps courtesy of the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative and Patrick Peters.

projects might emerge from the strategic plan: OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority; Greater Southeast Houston Management District; METRO; Houston Business Development, Inc.; and Houston Texans YMCA. Through the listening sessions, many of steering/stakeholder committee members also gave public presentations about their work or contributed to panel discussions.

### ■ Circuitous Paths

The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative achieved its main objectives, but the pathways to those outcomes evolved considerably from what was originally proposed. As Spillette recalled from when he initially invited steering committee members to participate:

I said we want to get two things done: a creative placemaking strategic plan and a pilot project. We definitely got those things done... Sometimes it felt like, 'Oh my gosh, we're going in new directions.' Actually, we're doing what said we were going to do; it's just that, when we were down in the weeds, it felt like we were going somewhere we didn't intend... There was an evolution, but not a change in the overall scope of the project.

How and why did its scope shift over time? Some of the evolutions were responses to changes in circumstances beyond the project leaders' control. Others represented shifts to better incorporate suggestions from placemaking experts or emerging community priorities. In addition, the passions, curiosity, and interests of leaders also heavily influenced the project's scope and direction.

Reductions in funding and changes in partner organizations' plans prompted major shifts in the project's scope and focus. The initial proposal to the NEA encompassed a larger geographic area, which was reflected in the project's original name, "The Third Ward Arts Initiative" (see Figure 1). However, the NEA's \$100,000 grant award was less than half of the \$250,000 requested. In addition, the board of

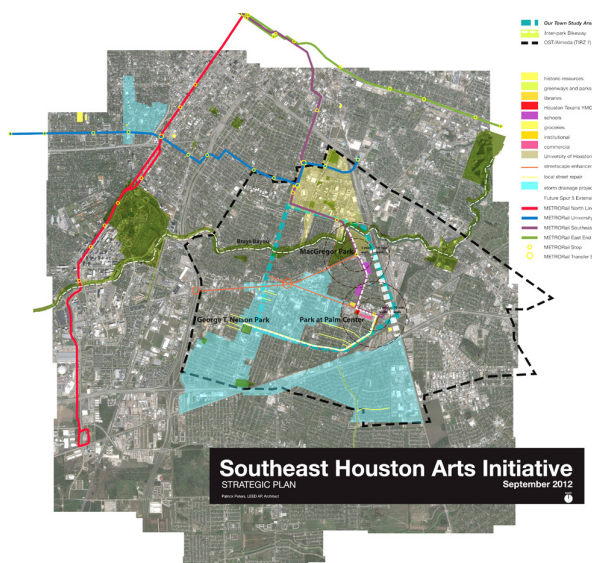


Figure 2 (Refer to inside front cover)

directors of OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority (the entity charged with administering the area's tax increment reinvestment funds and one of the listed partners on the grant application) elected to postpone work on two of the three project sites. The planned street reconstructions in the Third Ward neighborhood would no longer take place during the grant period, although the work at the Park at Palm Center would. Including cash and in-kind matches from the project's financial partners, the budget was reduced from \$510,000 to \$255,000. To bring the project into alignment with these changes, Blue opted to scale back the geographic scope, shift the focus to a strategic planning process, and produce only one artwork pilot project at the Park at Palm Center as opposed to the over 30 sites listed in the original proposal. Shifting the project's geographic focus to be more concentrated around the Park at Palm Center area resulted in a reshuffling of project partners. Three organizations that contributed letters of endorsement or partnership commitments phased out their involvement, including the acclaimed Project Row Houses, a nationally recognized creative placemaking forerunner. Ultimately, the project area expanded back out beyond the Park at Palm Center's immediate vicinity, but still omitted the historic Third Ward and is a smaller overall area than first proposed (see Figure 2).

While the above changes were reactions to circumstances outside of the project organizers' control, other shifts represented intentional evolutions to implement guidance from placemaking experts. Architect Maurice Cox, formerly the NEA's director of design and Mayor of Charlottesville, VA, inspired participants and heavily influenced the direction the project would take. Through a kick-off event held in collaboration with Houston Arts Alliance, the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative hosted Maurice Cox for a widely attended public discussion on creative placemaking and Houston's creative economy. Mr. Cox also lead small seminars for Southeast Houston Arts Initiative working groups and toured the project area, sharing his ideas and observations. As Blue explained, Maurice Cox's interpretation of creative placemaking emphasized the importance of artists, architects, and design professionals working actively together with community residents and area businesses to jointly formulate a strategic plan enriched by diverse contributions and multiple experiences. Early project documentation described workshops for artists to learn about best practices in arts, design and public policy arenas, which would provide a foundation for them to develop competitive artwork proposals. The emphasis now shifted, however, from artist trainings to broader listening sessions that would allow both community members and arts and design professionals to view the area more holistically.

Joint visioning did ensue and the values that participants expressed through the process shaped the strategic plan's goals. As Peters described, whereas other Our Town grants funded specific projects, for Southeast Houston Arts Initiative "there was an intention to listen and find the project." The strategic plan's overarching theme of healthy connectivity is what the extensive community explorations led them to. In

July 2011, Blue described the project's goals as a process to explore "how art, performing arts, new media, historic elements, green technology, and a main street concept can work together to support the city," – note that there is actually no mention of health. One year later she reflects that:

We found that the community wanted to address health, wellness, nutrition – the fact that's it's a food desert... How I'm looking at art and design now deals with the elements that community wanted to deal with versus me putting up a modern sculpture because the artist is a world-class artist... My understanding has shifted as a result of being in the community and seeing what they need. My original choice has been broadened and taken in a new direction as a result of the interactions.

Professor Blue's curiosity and worldview, however, still infused the project. Her tendency to seek out and understand big-picture, holistic connections was one influence in ultimately broadening the project area beyond the Park at Palm Center's immediate vicinity. It ultimately included linkages and connections to MacGregor and Nelson parks, area schools, light rail and bus connections, and Brays Bayou and its planned 31 miles of bike/hike trails.

In conclusion, Southeast Houston Arts Initiative's local context, key individuals and institutions, resource availability, and iterative learning all influenced how the initiative developed and its main activities and outcomes. The effort took place in Houston, where numerous authorities and institutions affect land use decisions, without comprehensive zoning, and both government and citizens are characterized as reactive. Southeast Houston presented an opportunity to coordinate and enhance a myriad of impending developments, but also lacked an established identity of place and faces demographic change. Both individuals and institutions shaped the project and contributed resources. Core players included Blue, the University of Houston, City of Houston, Spillette, residents active in civic club leadership, and volunteer technical advisors. Reductions in funding, shifts in partners' geographic focus, iterative learning, and the passions and interests of project leadership all contributed to shifts in the project's scope and direction. The result was a planning process that included numerous working groups, listening sessions, seminars, a survey, field trips and tours, reports on architectural history, and a community celebration. Concurrently, it supported three works of art for the Park at Palm Center and the adjacent community garden, with installations anticipated for early 2013. The initiative's major output was its strategic plan that emphasizes healthy connectivity through a bike/hike trail uniting the area's parks and transit connections, and new spaces for cultural programming and art and media installations.

## Initial Impacts

Though the strategic plan's ink is not yet dry and the artwork installations have yet to occur, interview and survey findings suggest that the planning process and artwork development both generated noteworthy initial impacts. The planning



process helped expand thinking about art, design, and the possibilities of creative placemaking. It also deepened civic engagement, by encouraging residents to help shape their own environment. Lastly, it fostered interaction among community members; in particular, it worked to break down institutional and professional/lay-person silos. The development of the artwork provided University of Houston students and faculty and an emerging artist with unique and valuable experience. In addition, the demonstration platform sparked interest in simple outdoor kitchens becoming a model for Houston community gardens and provided park users with a custom enhancement without its full cost. Creators expressed optimism that, once installed, these artworks will increase residents' investment in the park, promote gardening and nutrition, and provide the park and community garden with a compelling, interactive hub.

It is far too early to pass final judgment on the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative. As outlined in application materials,<sup>5</sup> the NEA offers the following as examples of desired long-term livability outcomes: growth in overall levels of social and civic engagement; arts- or design-focused changes in policies, laws, and/or regulations; job and/or revenue growth for the community; and changes in in-and-out migration patterns. Even at this early stage, evidence suggests that the initiative has deepened levels of civic engagement. Ultimately, the greatest tests will be to what extent progress can be made towards implementing the vision outlined in *Pathways to Southeast Houston's Future*, and, in turn, whether or not those strategies advance livability outcomes and/or the Southeast Houston community's priorities of personal and environmental health and wellness.

## ■ The Planning Process

### ■ Expanded Thinking

In our survey to participants of the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative, over 90 percent of respondents agreed that its public events helped:

- Expand knowledge and thinking about a range of important topics
- Inspire and spark community members' imaginations about opportunities
- Community members, and arts and design professionals generate creative ideas for improving Southeast Houston (Table 1).

**TABLE 1: Evaluation Survey Results: Benefits of Southeast Houston Arts Initiative public events**

The events helped...	Respondents selecting agree to strongly agree (%)*
inspire and spark community members' imaginations about opportunities for Southeast Houston.	97
community members, artists, designers, and/or architects generate creative ideas for improving Southeast Houston.	94
expand knowledge and thinking about a range of important topics for Southeast Houston.	91
empower the Southeast Houston community through increased awareness about important issues.	84
empower the Southeast Houston community through increased awareness of resources that could help them achieve their goals for community improvement.	81
designers and artists understand residents' perspectives.	81
foster new connections between artists, architects, design professionals, new media practitioners, residents, and business people.	78
provide artists, designers, and/or architects with opportunities to learn new skills and ways of working.	71
residents understand designers' and artists' perspectives.	71
ensure that the larger creative placemaking strategic plan reflected the priorities of the Southeast Houston community.	70

\*Based on a 5-point scale: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, no opinion. Source: Survey on Our Town Southeast Houston Public Events.

In its lessons learned, *Pathways to Southeast Houston's Future* asserts, "Art is more than statues and displays." It explains how Southeast Houston Arts Initiative participants now perceive that a variety of artistic disciplines, design, and cultural and environmental assets can each help express a place's cultural aesthetic, and historic character.

Interviewees further illuminate how community dialogues, throughout the process, and the exposure it offered to leading thinkers helped expand perspectives on art and creative placemaking:

It gave people an opportunity to change perspectives. Placemaking has the potential to ask people what they want to see. People are really being asked directly, more than just in a survey. Non-art goes got to participate in that process as well.

– **Karen Farber**, *Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts*

The basis of making the place – it's not about typical wide streets and banners on their flagpoles. Culture is the important element and ingredient of placemaking, not just the hard brick and mortar stuff...It has less to do about potholes and deficiencies in terms of infrastructure, and more about people themselves.

– **Keiji Asakura**, *Asakura Robinson*

What placemaking is was totally new to me. I had no idea it existed. It's finding an area to bring attention and connectivity to, reminding people of the roots and exploring how to improve its future. It's brining people together that normally don't see each other. It's a community builder.

– **Breanna Cotton**, *Southeast Houston resident (age 18)*

### ■ Empowering Residents to Shape Their Environment

Though it's a tough, long hill to climb, the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative also advanced civic engagement; specifically, it helped shift Houston's status quo to increase citizen involvement in land use change. Asakura, for one, sees potential that the experience in Southeast Houston might fuel similar shifts throughout the city. He states, "I'd like to somehow change the whole culture in Houston, so that people would take care of their own neighborhoods...That's the bigger challenge. If we make one little community successful, we can use it as an example to change minds in city hall."

Survey and interview data suggest that the process made good strides towards connecting residents to knowledge about local assets and planned infrastructure change, and planted the seed in their minds that they can influence their environment. Large majorities of survey respondents perceived that the process' public events helped empower the Southeast Houston community – 84 percent through increased awareness about important issues, and 81 percent through increased awareness of resources that could help them achieve their goals for community improvement (Table 1). Participants valued these offerings and wished that even more community members might have benefited from them:

Those forums where she brought together panels from city...were phenomenal. I learned a bunch from those. I just wish more people would have been invited and earlier in advance.

– **Carrie Schneider**, *independent artist*

I was made aware of the new community garden and outdoor kitchen in the Palm Center, as well as the new library...[and] the light rail system culminating at the Palm Center...But, I do not think that the residents of this area are aware of the total picture, just seeing the streets torn up and construction going on. This neighborhood is a place where the residents are 70 years and over. They are usually more occupied with day-to-day living, and there is no outreach to make them aware of possible new opportunities.

– **Survey respondent**, *Southeast Houston business leader*

In a city where both citizens and government officials are characterized as more reactive than pro-active, the progress achieved through Southeast Houston Arts Initiative should be celebrated. As Spillette explains:

[Community members'] thinking used to be, 'Well what are other organizations going to do for us?' Now they understand that they have to be the ones that have to go out and get stuff done...In Houston, both government and citizens are typically reactive. Not that there haven't been citizens in the past that have pushed for change, but to do it on a big scale – 'Yeah, we're going to take on this challenge ourselves.' Now it's more pervasive.

To put this into context, Kemp was blown away by "the passion people in Houston have for changing their own environment." He reflected that he did not think that he could get people in his own LA as mobilized or as vocal.

### ■ **Breaking Down Silos**

Connecting fragmented sectors and institutions and bridging lay-people with arts and design professionals represents the initiative's other major initial impact. As artist liaison Cedric Douglas stated, "It brought people to the table who had not been communicating – people who had been working in their own islands, working in isolation...It brought a wide swath of the city and local community together for a first conversation; that first moment of breaking bread."

Survey results support these observations. For example, 78 percent of respondents indicated that the initiative's public

events fostered new connections between artists, architects, design professionals, new media practitioners, residents, and business people. Eighty-one and 71 percent, respectively, of respondents agreed that the events helped designers and artists understand residents' perspectives and vice versa (Table 1). As with residents' empowerment, interviewees also spoke to the need to sustain and expand this work. Minnette Boesel, the mayor's assistant for cultural affairs said:

[Southeast Houston] has all these developments: the new library, the new Y, KIPP Academy, METRO. It didn't seem like people were talking to each other very much...It's almost a gift to the city to be able to forge this kind of a dialogue, to have these partnerships made and people speaking together...It's a question of just keeping it going.

### ■ **Artwork: Anticipated and Achieved**

Though not yet installed, the initiative's leaders and artworks' creators expressed high expectations for these artworks' impacts, and spoke to benefits that the individuals directly involved had already experienced.

They expect that the demonstration platform and Sun-Stop Para-Sol Solar Art Shed will serve as focal points for the community garden, and help advance interest in gardening and healthy eating. As Spillette described:

[The demonstration platform] is just one structure, but it's outside of just the plants growing in the ground. Through it's graphics and the design of the shed itself and the online aspects, it will definitely broaden people's perspectives on the way health, wellness, and nutrition can be thoroughly embedded in the environment.

With excitement, Asakura explained that he sees strong potential for the demonstration platform to become model throughout Houston. Representatives from Texas Southern University, involved in community garden conversions, recently approached him to see how they might emulate this idea of including an outdoor kitchen and teaching tools in their projects.

The demonstration platform and solar art shed appear to be a win-win for the students, professors, landscape architect, city, and OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority. Asakura praised the faculty and students' involvement, specifically their energy and follow through, and is eager for future collaborations. Houston's Public Works Department estimated that the cost of acquiring a similar custom structure would have run \$100,000, and consequently, the likely alternative would have been to buy a pre-fabricated piece off the shelf. Because University of Houston faculty and students designed and fabricated the structure, the City, Redevelopment Authority, and park users receive the value of the custom design and enhancements without the full cost. The University of Houston undergraduate students gained deep and unique experience. The graphics communication students working on the online educational games received consultations via Skype throughout the semester from Robert Miles Kemp, an LA-based pioneer of interactive architecture (a practice that explores new ways to combine digital and



University of Houston architecture students learn fabrication techniques for the demonstration platform. Photo courtesy of Patrick Peters.

physical worlds and promote dialogues between people and architecture and people and each other). Blue recounts that they ended up designing 17 different games, going above and beyond the call of duty. Four architecture students, none of whom had any real background in building or technical drawing, worked particularly hard to see the project through the fabrication stage and to produce the companion project booklet. For their efforts, the eight graduating architecture seniors won a prestigious design award juried by professionals outside the university – the only collaborative project awarded.

Schneider’s *Community Print Path*, if approved and funded, will invite exchange, by letting people “walk a mile in each others’ shoes” through the audio tours, and increase community members’ investment and pride in the park. “People will have a literal physical investment,” Schneider explains. “They’ll be able to point and say, that’s my footprint. That’s my impression in this place.”

Schneider, an artist early in her professional career, also received valuable experience working with a public agency and benefited from mentorship. As Asakura explained:

We helped Carrie with turning her vision into something workable. Just because you’re an artist doesn’t mean you’re well versed in public art. There are lots of issues – from safety to wearability, to maintenance...Any artist that goes into that arena of public art gets that scrutiny from agencies – is it safe, maintainable?

The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative’s initial and anticipated impacts provide a promising foundation from which to build. The planning process empowered community members to shape their own environment; expanded thinking on the role of arts, design, and creative placemaking; and broke down institutional silos and fostered new interactions between lay people and professionals. The artworks should increase community members’ investment in the park and advance interest in gardening and healthy eating, while providing compelling, interactive hubs for the Park and its community garden. Organizers and community leaders can build on this momentum as they work to advance the strategies outlined in *Pathways to Southeast Houston’s Future*.

## Strengths, Challenges and Lessons Learned

A primary motivation for this evaluation was to analyze what was most effective about the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative’s initial foray into creative placemaking. What challenges did the initiative face and how were they met? Project leaders sincerely want to continually improve their own work, and bravely decided to offer their experiences up as a case study, so that other people interested in pursuing or funding creative placemaking efforts could also benefit. Along the same lines, many of the people we interviewed pinpointed factors that will help or hinder the strategic plan’s likelihood of implementation – in part or in full. We share those opportunities and threats to make them more widely understood.

In terms of what the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative did most effectively and assets successfully leveraged, numerous interviewees attested to:

- The initiator’s determination, resourcefulness, and ability to connect people and cultivate new opportunities
- Connecting Southeast Houston to inspiring thinkers and practices from around the country
- A commitment to community empowerment
- The participatory community celebration event
- A plan that reflects community priorities and spatially links strategies and assets

The project navigated many challenges and will continue to do so moving forward. These include:

- Funding
- Communication: struggles to convey objectives and scarce resources
- Community engagement:
  - Engagement of Latino residents, youth, and renters
  - Lack of existing passion for the Park at Palm Center
  - A need for tangible outcomes to sustain interest
  - Making the case for art or creative placemaking amidst pressing infrastructure and economic needs
- Difficulty clarifying and funding artists’ roles and sustaining their involvement
- Mixed success leveraging institutional partners and stakeholders
- Implementation

Below, we elaborate on these strengths and challenges. Subsequently, we draw out recommendations for how the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative can learn from these factors and strengthen its work moving forward.

### ■ Strengths

#### ■ The Initiator: Connector, Cultivator of Opportunities, Determined, Resourceful

As Ann Markusen and I observed in our analysis of 14 case studies in *Creative Placemaking*, a 2010 white paper for the NEA’s Mayors’ Institute on City Design, successful initiatives all relied upon innovative initiators with vision and drive. As with those, much of the character, direction, and success of the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative hinged on its initiator,



Professor Carroll Blue. Without Blue's involvement, the project would not have happened. Her interests in new media and inclination to view holistic/big picture connections permeated the project. Her commitment to empower the community and let their priorities shape the vision, shifted the project's focus considerably. As a respected community member, she had entrée and was able to leverage trust. Blue's determined and resourceful nature, and her ability to connect people and cultivate new opportunities, stood out as some of the initiative's greatest assets.

Blue's determination and resourcefulness fueled much the initiative's momentum. She secured over \$80,000 worth of funds for the project – \$50,000 in individual donations, \$15,000 through her non profit, The Dawn Project, and \$16,500 from HARC. Spillette explained that Blue's dedicated and successful fundraising has completely changed his outlook on funding prospects. "Carroll has been so good at scrounging for money everywhere and being completely unafraid to pursue funds," he said. "Fiscal resources are always a challenge, but if you've got good people with good ideas, then you can overcome that." A number of interviewees described Blue as relentless in her efforts, which they viewed as a strong positive asset.

By strategically linking people, Blue also helped propel new opportunities. For instance, to develop a youth-led blog and community mapping project, BayouVoices links a home schooler, Jack Yates high school students and teachers, adult area residents, the Third Ward Sustainability Project, and HARC.

Blue also took it upon herself to cultivate relationships with national experts and connect Southeast Houston to resources from outside the area. For example, early in the process a small delegation traveled to California where they attended a seminar on youth involvement in urban planning. After seeing an impressive exhibit at the Los Angeles' Holocaust Museum, Blue reached out to its designer, Robert Miles Kemp. Kemp went on to visit Houston, and offered a seminar to artists and design professionals on interactive architecture. Via Skype, Kemp coached University of Houston students over the course of a semester as they designed online educational games on gardening, nutrition and personal wellness. He stated, "Because of her passion – my door is wide open. I told her that I will help anyone in any way, and not be financially compensated. I think a lot of people feel the same way." Most recently Kemp consulted with artist Carrie Schneider about ways in which she might inexpensively obtain a mobile app to increase access to her audio tours, *Hear Our Houston*.

### ■ Connecting to Inspiring Thinking and Practices from Around the Country

One of the most effective ways in which the organizers built understanding of and support for creative placemaking, was by pulling in inspiring thinkers and practices from around the country. The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative brought in three national experts to share their approaches to creative placemaking and design: Maurice Cox (an architect and formerly the Mayor of Charlottesville, VA and NEA director of design), Robert Miles Kemp, and Cynthia Nitkin of the New

York City based Project for Public Spaces. Small delegations also traveled to conferences and seminars in California, New York, Ohio, and Maryland. They shared the lessons they learned about effective approaches to placemaking with the Southeast Houston community. Blue and Douglas also searched the Internet for reports and videos on creative placemaking and shared these resources to boost participants' understanding.

The project organizers viewed creative placemaking as uncharted territory for Southeast Houston. This propelled their efforts to glean some assemblage of roadmaps from others' experiences. In May, Blue jokingly reflected that, "I am really learning a lot from this whole new process of creative placemaking. Nobody else knows what they're doing either." Blue wanted to provide opportunities for participants to learn from and be inspired by "best practices." The organizers encountered some resistance to outside experts. For instance, Jason McLemore of the Greater Southeast Management District stated, "It doesn't help me to go on and on about what worked in LA or Philadelphia. It may have worked there, but it's not Houston." However, 77 percent of survey respondents agreed that the placemaking seminars exposed the Southeast Houston community to new thinking from national experts. In particular, numerous interviewees found the Maurice Cox panel discussion, seminars, and site tour to be of great value:

I thought it [the Maurice Cox presentation] was real beneficial, hearing the kinds of stuff that he did. He talked about the political process evolving. He's a mayor and an architect that can see it.

– Anonymous interviewee

The most important direction change, from my perspective, came to be the influence of Maurice Cox... his thinking and enthusiasm for a work of art not to necessarily be an object that is provided by a person who calls himself or herself an artist, but that a careful design of an environment can be a work of art.

– Patrick Peters, *University of Houston*

### ■ Commitment to Community Empowerment

Although the project benefited from a strong initiator, it also emphasized a grassroots process dedicated to empowering residents and workers of Southeast Houston to shape a vision for its future. Several interviewees commented with pride on the grassroots orientation of the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative:

The engagement...was about the best I've seen in terms of getting people to dialogue with each other and communicate and reaching out...We've all seen studies where people are talked to or at, but it should be bottom up.

– Minnette Boesel, *Mayor's Assistant for Cultural Affairs*

[It gave] the residents, the people, the power...so that they could help themselves, and that their own creative effort...could add to bigger things in making their neighborhood more interesting.

– Keji Asakura, *Asakura Robinson*



Owner of Sunshine Health Food discussing nutrition at the Community Celebration Event. Photo courtesy of Emily Peacock/TLC2.

They were trying to give a foundation to that community to hand it back to the community – hear what you want and hear guidance from consultants on what you have to do to achieve it. They were successful at that.

– **Matthew Lennon**, *Houston Arts Alliance*

Community engagement was one of the most extensive accomplishments. A project idea came out of, organically arose from, the influence of these listening sessions.

– **Patrick Peters**, *University of Houston*

The strategic plan and project organizers also describe the promising momentum made transitioning leadership to a small cadre of community members. Blue feels strongly that the Southeast Houston community must “own” the vision and its implementation, for both ethical and practical reasons. Only shared leadership is sustainable. In December 2011, Blue joked, “I need a mommy and chicken soup because I’m going to bed. I need a rest.” These community members and project organizers are in the thick of examining difficult questions, such as organizational structures, realistic expectations for a volunteer-driven initiative, and whether resources could be found to continue paid staff support. However, they have already demonstrated their commitment by giving generously of their time. As civic club leaders, they are most likely to spearhead implementation projects when those closely dovetail with the interests and needs of their designated neighborhood.

### ■ The Participatory Community Celebration

The near year-long process culminated in a community celebration; the initiative’s most widely lauded offering. Fifty community residents worked with a team of 32 volunteer artists, architects, and urban planners. While feasting on food from local businesses and enjoying spoken word performances, residents generated ideas on the Southeast Houston’s past, present, and future. Activities ranged from video interviews, to scans of family heirlooms, to discussions that used large-scale maps as focal points.

The event came together through the creative efforts of a number of collaborators. The Social Agency Lab, Houston



Small group discussion at the Community Celebration Event. Photo courtesy of Emily Peacock/TLC2.

Arts Alliance, and HNOMA crafted the event with the initiative’s core working group. Asakura recalled, “Community celebration is what we called it. I said, ‘don’t call it a charrette, that sounds so boring, no one will come. Tell them that we’re serving fried chicken.’” Through a charrette process closely following the event, a team of artists, designers, and core community participants synthesized the ideas generated during the celebration.

People prized this offering because of broad participation by community members and its emphasis on active generation through multiple creative experiences:

It was the first event where community members were becoming participants, not just resources for information, and offering wish lists. They told us their stories, memories, and what they hoped to see in the future. We were there sitting with people telling them what’s out there in terms of resources and what can be done. The community really felt that this was not a standard kind of community consultation, but real activity that was generating something more than just information.

– **Matthew Lennon**, *Houston Arts Alliance*

In hindsight, the project organizers wish they had included more interactive charrette-type events earlier and throughout the process. Participants valued what they learned via listening sessions – 66 percent of survey respondents indicated that the topics covered the most important issues facing the Southeast Houston community, and 77 percent felt satisfied with the balance between discussing current issues/needs and providing opportunities to work towards solutions. But, during the May events, Spillette heard a clear desire for more opportunities for participatory action, which he described as an enlightening moment.

### ■ The Plan: Community Priorities and Linked Strategies and Assets

*Pathways to Southeast Houston’s Future* represents the major output of Southeast Houston Arts Initiative’s planning process. The plan organizers take pride that the bike/hike trail, new spaces for cultural programming, and art and media installations all reflect the community-driven theme of healthy connectivity. By choosing to focus on a geographic

area where a number of major, but hitherto uncoordinated, physical developments are rapidly coming on line, community members and project organizers capitalized on a critical opportunity to explore ways in which these assets might be enhanced and connected. By using GIS mapping, the organizers newly visualized the ways in which these developments could be enhanced and existing shortcomings. Patrick Peters describes that the bike/hike trail strategy:

...takes advantage of things already there that are good, like the three parks themselves, and address shortcomings of the situation...The two schools, the public library, and the new YMCA – the light rail is more than a quarter mile away from all of them. Walking a quarter mile in Houston in the summer is a problem...So we asked, what is it that we can do to fix the problem that has already happened, because the light rail not going to move...Light rail gives the illusion of access without pleasant access. Our proposed bikeway between the parks, and the walkway from the station to library and Y, attempts to ameliorate that.

In sum, the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative capitalized on a number of strengths. Numerous interviewees counted the initiative's community celebration event as a highly effective offering. They credited the project organizers with a sincere commitment to community empowerment. The resulting strategic plan reflects community priorities and spatially links strategies and physical assets. Blue's determination, resourcefulness, and skills at connecting people and cultivating new opportunities all enhanced the project. She helped introduce Southeast Houston to inspiring thinkers and practices from across the country, thereby broadening perspectives and enhancing their own work. We next turn to the challenges the initiative already faced and those on the horizon.

## ■ Challenges

### ■ Funding

Blue struggled to align financial resources with ambition, throughout the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative's inaugural planning year, and this difficult work will only continue into the implementation phase. As Patrick Peters described, "The first challenge was getting our funding cut in less than half...There is no way that you can do the same idea with less than half the funding. You have to reboot and find a credible way of doing it."

Not only did the initiative receive only 40% of the amount they requested from the NEA, but the University of Houston also allocated 25% for indirect costs. This is the University of Houston's federally negotiated non-research rate for indirect costs, and its \$150,000 in-kind contributions of faculty and staff support far exceed this amount. However, though typical for universities, this percentage is high for the non profit arts and cultural world. For instance, an area grantmaker considers 10-17% reasonable for administration. The initiative suffered another blow when a third of Houston's planning department was laid off due to severe budget cuts, which meant that it could not provide the in-kind support initially

envisioned. One steering committee member summed up these challenges: "They are all doing the best they can with what they got – it's a little petty cash when whittled down."

Project organizers resourcefully fundraised to augment resources for the planning process and are aggressively seeking funding prospects to incrementally implement the plan's strategies and continue this work. With tenacious persistence, Blue not only scaled back the project to match reduced funding, but also successfully raised an additional \$50,000 from individual donors and \$16,500 from HARC. Moving forward, grant proposals have already been submitted to the National Park Service and Innovations. Networking meetings with stakeholders and new organizations have pointed out other funding prospects and possible fiscal sponsors. One participant suggested that the initiative might spearhead an effort to lobby the city to dedicate a percent for art from horizontal public capital improvement projects (highways, bikeways, etc.), in addition to the current 1.75% allocation from buildings.

### ■ Communication: Struggles to Convey Objectives and Limited Resources

The greatest challenges for the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative organizers and participants revolved around communication. In both March and July, interviewees voiced that planning process' objectives had not been clearly conveyed and that specific communication pieces (such as the website or a "leave behind" flyer) came on too late in the process or were missing entirely. Through our interviews and focus groups we learned that even the most heavily involved community members weren't fully aware of the extent of activities falling under the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative umbrella. The causes for these shortcomings include the shifting scope of the project itself, financial constraints, and the project organizers' individual communication strengths and weaknesses. As constructive criticism, stakeholders suggested that their continued involvement would be more readily facilitated, if the plan included clearer deliverables and specifics on timelines and funding sources. Both project organizers and participants also pointed to better communication as one way that community engagement efforts could have been strengthened.

One reason that community participants, stakeholders, and project partners struggled to clearly understand the project's objectives was the fact that the scope and activities evolved so considerably. What the initiative was called, the names and compositions of working groups, and terminology around the plan itself changed throughout the process. The Third Ward Arts Initiative became Our Town Southeast Houston and is currently called Southeast Houston Arts Initiative.

The process involved 11 different working groups or categories of people. Many were short lived, though groups merged and individuals continued to participate in new or different working groups. Trainings for artists and design professionals evolved into learning sessions, ultimately called



listening sessions. The plan has variously been referred to as a vision plan, a public spaces enhancement strategy, and a creative placemaking strategic plan. The effort is characterized as both a research study, with Professor Blue serving as its principal investigator, and a creative placemaking planning initiative. Although the project's evolutions dictated many of these changes, the lack of consistency challenged participants:

The thing that I heard people get frustrated with was that it was not very clearly organized or communicated what anything was...It wasn't that people didn't understand creative placemaking; they didn't understand why they were at meetings. The project was so broad in scope, so far reaching, touching on so many different areas. Sometimes it was not clearly or specifically communicated what was being asked of participants. In some cases, the solution was to make it even more complicated or try it again with new people.

– **Anonymous interviewee**

I don't understand what they are trying to accomplish... It used to be all about new technology in the park...You started the project with a certain logic line because of the park; then it was taken away. You can't just go global in its absence...If they were just trying to get people together it was great! But beyond that, I don't know.

– **Jason McLemore, Greater Southeast Management District**

Limited financial resources also affected communication. The original grant proposal to the NEA indicated that the University of Houston and City of Houston would provide marketing resources and that the initiative would retain a part-time public relations person. The proposal budgets, however, did not include a specific line item for the PR person, so the intention was never for the University of Houston to make a salaried hire. Neither was this position filled as a consultant, perhaps due to the reduced grant award. Throughout the course of the project, the University of Houston Texas Learning & Computation Center did provide marketing services, including editorial support, photography, videography, and graphic design. However, internal restructuring and budget cuts caused some disruption and concern for project organizers that the level of support might not be sustained through the project's completion. Project consultants Steve Spillette and Gwen Fedrick, who joined the project in

October and February, respectively, lent critical support maintaining sign-in sheets at events, and sending out email announcements to a growing list, but neither offered specific PR, or web or graphic design expertise. Breanna Cotton, a home-schooled high school student, currently serves as the social media coordinator, with Facebook and Twitter accounts activated in April and June 2012. The project's website only went live in May 2012, through Krist Bender's in-kind contributions. Currently, the website does not contain links to many of the valuable and impressive resources developed through the process, including the architectural history reports on MacGregor Park and Palm Center, and the elegant brochures on the demonstration platform and its educational panels and online games.

Working within a constrained budget, the project organizers brought to bear their own communication skills. Interviewees credited Blue with dealing directly with interpersonal tension and maintaining connections to key stakeholders. In keeping with Blue's background as a filmmaker, the project also innovatively used video to drum up interest in the community survey for the Park at Palm Center, to showcase the personal storytelling that occurred during the community celebration, and through the BayouVoices blog. However, the project organizers' writing styles are not naturally clear or concise. This made the written pieces produced (grant proposals, update documents, and the plan itself) more difficult to absorb. In March, Boesel offered this feedback:

The message is not coming across clearly. [The project organizers] understand it intuitively, but it's hard for them to communicate and explain the basics. It needs to be clear and concise. Not this philosophizing, but get to the point.

Some interviewees familiar with the draft/summary version of the plan offered constructive criticism that it lacked specificity on how to advance the strategies presented, such as detailing cost, timeline estimates, and funding prospects. Boesel offered extensive feedback at the end of the process to help the organizers generate a short, bullet-pointed draft summary, suitable for city council members. Clear and specific deliverables would help stakeholders renew their commitment:

**TABLE 2: Evaluation Survey Results: Suggestions for improving Our Town Southeast Houston public events**

	Respondents selecting very important-above neutral (%)*
More use of social media to continue dialogue	82
More discussion between audience members and presenters	81
More artist-led interactive experiences	75
More posting of content on a website/blog	75
More hands-on projects	74
More discussion among audience members themselves	63
More inspiring venues	45
More take-home materials	44
More discussion among presenters	43

\*Based on a 8-point scale: not important (1), neutral (4), very important (7), and no opinion. Source: Survey on Our Town Southeast Houston Public Events.

Deliverables would help me understand these core activities...[and] would help with HNOMA's continued efforts.

– **LaTanya Stevenson**, *HNOMA*

If they can define their needs in clear terms with a plan that has real deliverables, then Houston Arts Alliance can assist them in helping make it happen. I was trying to show them politics of art and placemaking. They need to develop a language that's clear that they can use with city council and district development people – what they need and why it's feasible.

– **Matthew Lennon**, *Houston Arts Alliance*

Both the participants and project organizers also acknowledged that more robust use of communication tools would have greatly aided community engagement. Forty-three percent of survey respondents indicated that a lack of awareness of other events discouraged them from attending more. When asked for suggestions on what would improve events, survey respondents voiced the most enthusiasm for more use of social media to continue dialogue (82 percent). In addition to social media, 75 percent of survey respondents suggested that more posting of content on a website or blog would improve Our Town Southeast Houston events (Table 2). Artist liaison Cedric Douglas wished for a website, with a visual timeline, that would serve as a centralized place where a new person could readily understand what had been accomplished already, outstanding action steps, and how he or she could plug in. In the plan's lessons learned, the project organizers reflect that:

Meeting face-to-face with "strangers" without a website, business card, or other leave-behind collateral diminished our outreach efforts. Without a branded identity, we were not effective at involving businesses in the area and the general public apart from those involved in civic clubs. Young people use social media to communicate. We needed to employ more of those channels along with a vibrant and dynamic website.

### ■ Community Engagement

Even with the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative's clear commitment to grassroots community empowerment, they faced challenges with community engagement. Certain residents groups including homeowners, African-Americans, and leaders of civic groups visibly participated, whereas the initiative had less success involving Latinos, youth, and renters. All planning efforts face challenges actualizing meaningful public participation, and many interviewees credited the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative's successes. The initiative's community engagement efforts faced unique obstacles including lack of existing passion for the Park at Palm Center, difficulties sustaining interest through tangible outcomes, and making the case for art or creative placemaking amidst pressing infrastructure and economic needs.

#### **Engagement of Latino Residents, Youth and Renters**

Despite the accolades that the initiative received for its commitment to community empowerment, both project organizers and participants recognized they had not adequately engaged some segments of the community. Spillette acknowledged that, "In terms of involving older, long-term African-American residents, we did really well. Schools, churches, and Hispanic residents, we did not do so well. We had virtually no participation by Latinos. This will continue to be a challenge." Survey findings further illuminate this characterization. Over 90 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the initiative's events successfully engaged African-Americans, representatives of civic clubs, and professionals working in architecture, design, or planning. In contrast, 11 percent, 10 percent, and 7 percent of respondents strongly disagreed that the events successfully engaged renters, Latinos, and youth/young adults, respectively (Table 3). Interviewees both praised the attendance and diversity at meetings and offered constructive criticism and feedback on groups that were not adequately represented:

It was very successful in terms of community meetings. I saw people I had never seen, and these meetings were very well attended. That was a great success. They even got people out in evenings.

– **Jason McLemore**, *Greater Southeast Management District*

**TABLE 3: Evaluation Survey Results: Diversity of Participation in Our Town Southeast Houston Public Events**

Please rate the relative strengths and weaknesses of Southeast Houston Our Town's events with regards to public participation. The events successfully engaged...	Strongly Agree to Agree(%)*	Strongly Disagree (%)*
African-Americans/people of African descent	93	0
representatives of civic clubs and self-improvement groups	93	0
professionals working in architecture, design, or planning	90	0
artists	73	0
homeowners in Southeast Houston/Greater Third Ward	72	0
older residents and seniors	72	0
representatives of community schools and other civic institutions	69	0
leaders in the Southeast Houston/Greater Third Ward business community	69	0
government officials	63	4
youth/young adults	60	7
faith communities	41	0
people of Latino, Hispanic, or Chicano racial/ethnic identities	34	10
renters in Southeast Houston/Greater Third Ward	29	11

\*Based on a 5-point scale: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, no opinion. Source: Survey on Our Town Southeast Houston Public Events.

The same people are at every event. The elderly and youth are underrepresented. Some voices are missing... We need to take the meetings to different venues to get different people. Hold them in school cafeterias, at PTA meetings, the offices of civic clubs... We need to get people who don't go to meetings involved.

– **LaTanya Stevenson, HNOMA**

I don't think we reached the community...The park was designed for the apartments next door, and they have not been involved in this process at all.

– **Dr. Teddy McDavid, OST Community Partnership**

The fact that both the project organizers and core working group members are already aware of these engagement shortfalls bodes well for their ability to turn the ship. Fedrick plans to renew community engagement efforts this fall, with the support of two graduate social work students. The project organizers see expanded partnership with area schools as a promising pathway to reach the Latino community. The plan also refers to recruiting a youth/young adult champion to spearhead outreach to young adults and families.

### ***Uphill Battle to Ignite Passion for the Park at Palm Center***

A perceived lack of awareness and existing interest in the park also hindered the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative. For example, only 44 percent of respondents from the Park at Palm Center Community Survey were aware of the park before the survey. The initiative focused on the Park at Palm Center, in large part, because the matching funds supplied by OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority were dedicated to that site. The selected project area was also a logical choice because it strategically encompassed major development projects. Some community residents, however, struggled to understand why this area had been singled out. As Dr. Teddy McDavid, an active resident leader, explained, "This community is focused on MacGregor Park. It always will be...All of a sudden Palm Center Park was introduced, but there was no community support to generate this idea. 'Why was this money not used for MacGregor Park?' is a common question." The strategic plan successfully addresses this concern through an emphasis on connectivity – its main proposal of a three-mile bike/hike trail links the Park at Palm Center to MacGregor Park, as well as Nelson Park, the Brays Bayou trail system, and major light rail and bus stops.

### ***Sustaining Interest Through Tangible Outcomes***

By some measures, the initiative's planning timeline was extremely condensed, however, many interviewees pointed to the need for participants to see outcomes, even if just incrementally, to sustain their engagement:

People attend sessions but still have not gotten a deliverable. They need a visual deliverable for what came out of the charrettes, so they can see the visual/physical benefits...The more we drag them [the community] to meetings, the more they will get tired if we don't give them anything tangible.

– **LaTanya Stevenson, HNOMA**

They have to move to that activity phase, because if they don't, people will lose interest. People will engage if there's something to engage with. If not, then they focus on the laundry, food, and who is taking care of the kids.

– **Matthew Lennon, Houston Arts Alliance**

These quotes, from July interviews, to a large extent reflect that participants are hungry to see the fruits of their labor – the plan and signs of its implementation – after a long, period of engagement. Fortunately, *Pathways to Southeast Houston's Future* includes maps and renderings by landscape architects to help participants conceptualize the possibilities. Next steps outlined in the plan include a temporary bike lane/farmers market demonstration project to stimulate peoples' imaginations to how these elements would function and enhance their environment. In retrospect, the project organizers also wished they had included more generative events and incremental projects earlier and throughout the process.

### ***The Hierarchy of Needs: Struggles to Make the Case for Creative Placemaking and Art***

Project organizers also faced challenges getting community members excited about the creative placemaking effort. Families' needs just to pay the bills, and concerns about crime, small business retention, and shoddy infrastructure took precedence. Forty percent of survey respondents indicated that competition for time, due to work and family commitments, deterred them from participating in more of the process' public events. Resident Cean Cotton explained, "If I am concerned with employment and kids, I am more concerned with survival, not a park. Many people just don't have the energy to take part in this." All participatory planning processes face similar challenges around sustaining interest and engagement. For creative placemaking efforts, however, this may be exacerbated, if the public is used to thinking about arts and cultural assets as a frill or window dressing.

In a particularly extreme example, in early January 2012 Southeast Houston sustained severe flooding, due to heavy rain, construction and a blocked drainage system. Blue relayed in an email, "I do not have a clue as to handle this, as our public art installation-related concerns are soooo secondary to this crisis in this amazingly underserved community. People want things fixed and don't have much time to consider creative placemaking."

Creative placemaking, with its emphasis on enhancing livability, can very much complement and encompass "essential needs" concerns. However, Blue and the other organizers understandably felt as though they were in unchartered territory, as they investigated and tried to convey how arts and cultural assets can effectively advance infrastructure deficiencies. Blue describes how they responded to these challenges by broadened their scope and working understanding of creative placemaking:

The community said, "To hell with art. We want to figure out how to deal with aging and decaying infrastructure. How do we get crime off the streets, bring businesses back in the community, and get young people back in our communities?"...Yes, it's nice to have



artists and architects come in and design something, but if the infrastructure is rotted and useless, then you have to deal with infrastructure – we’re attempting to address some of those more larger, more pressing issues.

The strategic plan's lessons learned assert that “art is more than statues and public displays” and that “art is an innovative community development tool.” Participants in the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative now perceive that a range of artistic and cultural expression and disciplines play valuable roles in expressing the cultural, aesthetic, and historic character of a place. Tools such as digital mapping, storytelling, and educational games and resources can aide empowerment.

### ■ Artists: Difficulty Clarifying and Funding Roles and Sustaining Involvement

Although a filmmaker initiated the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative, project organizers faced ongoing challenges to conceptualize artists’ roles, and recruit and sustain their involvement. Through an iterative process, the organizers’ interests in what artists might offer, and what the project might offer them, shifted. Reduced funding complicated what organizers could ask and reasonably expect artists to provide. Unfortunately, even beyond financial resources, a lack of clarity on what their role should be curtailed artists’ involvement.

The project organizers’ vision of artists’ roles evolved throughout the process. For instance, Maurice Cox emphasized the importance of residents, area businesses, and arts and design professionals jointly formulating a strategic plan. Inspired by his visit, the earlier idea of offering artists a series of new media art trainings to provide them with the skills to develop competitive proposals shifted into learning sessions open to both community residents and arts and design professionals. Spillette reflects on how his own perspective changed throughout the process:

[Early in the process] I was so concerned, personally, about getting the art. I kept saying, “We need ideas for artistic end of this.” Making sure that art is part of this continues to be important, but it became less of a worry. Other aspects took precedence. We have to make sure as it moves forward that art, and artists, and creative thinking continues to be part of the process. But those projects will emerge.

With reduced NEA funding, the project organizers faced resource constraints that compromised their ability to fund artists’ involvement. In July, Blue reflected, “I wanted to pay artists. My challenge was that I didn’t have money to pay the artists...I was embroiled in a situation, and I didn’t know how to handle it.” The need to stretch funding was one factor in Blue and OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority’s choice to leverage University of Houston faculty and student resources to create the demonstration platform at the Park at Palm Center’s community garden. However, Blue’s continued fundraising efforts from individual donors did allow the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative to pledge \$9,500 to OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority to support

artwork in the Park at Palm Center, with Carrie Schneider’s *Community Print Path* being the anticipated beneficiary.

Although residents, architects, landscape architects, and planners extensively volunteered their time at working group meetings and public events, artists did not sustain similar levels of pro-bono commitment throughout the process. Blue reflected in February, “One of my major problems is bringing in the artists into brainstorming process. They don’t want their ideas stolen, and they want to get paid. If they’re not going to get money at the end of the deal, then it doesn’t make sense for them to do it.” As the previous quote alludes to, artists face different opportunity costs and livelihood considerations than other participants. Matthew Lennon will receive the same salary from Houston Arts Alliance regardless of whether or not he provides technical assistance to the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative. Artists face a different calculus, with rates of self-employment estimated at 3.5 times those of other workers.<sup>6</sup> As Floyd Newsum, an established artist who curtailed his involvement early in the process, explained:

I had to think about...how much money and time is it going to take to involve me. I was willing to do it if there was a budget and I knew I was going to get paid, but I had other projects in the incubator. This would pull work from those.

But even beyond financial considerations, challenges around clearly articulating artists’ desired role dampened their sustained involvement. In March 2012, as part of a revamped engagement effort, Cedric Douglas became the initiative’s artist liaison. Nine new artists joined the process, but questions such as, ‘What do you really want from me? Are we making art? Helping with a charrette, or urban planning? Is this a think tank?’ kept coming up. Artists came away from listening sessions unclear on whether they were really needed and what they were supposed to take away from the conversation. Because no money or materials had been provided to work within their artistic disciplines, they assumed they were not there to paint, etc. But, neither Douglas nor Blue adequately answered the question, ‘What is my creative charge?’

### ■ Mixed Success Leveraging Institutional Partners and Stakeholders

As with any plan, the degree to which the strategies of *Pathways to Southeast Houston’s Future* get implemented depends to a great extent on politics. Which agencies and individuals might champion the initiative? What resources might they contribute? The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative made great strides in courting the support of key public agencies and property owners in the project area. However, some critical relationships have also frayed. Some steering committee members felt that the project’s scope had deviated too much from what initially attracted them and/or failed to see the community engagement process as legitimate.

<sup>6</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *ArtistsInWorkforce.pdf*, Research Report, Research Report (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, May 2008), iii, <http://www.nea.gov/research/ArtistsInWorkforce.pdf>.

The initiative also encountered turf issues and resistance to changing the status quo. The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative successfully employed multiple strategies to increase buy-in from stakeholders. One stakeholder/steering committee member commented, "They actively solicit, 'Who do we need to have in the room?' as an ongoing statement; that's important." Spillette invited area property owners and key public agencies to formally participate as members of the steering/stakeholders committee. He designed listening sessions to empower the Southeast Houston community through increased knowledge about available resources, but also to deepen the stakeholders' investment in the process. By asking them to present about their work or organization, the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative would stay on their radar screen, and they would have a bit more skin in the game. They, too, could learn more about the other players in this area.

Because of these efforts and nurturing one-on-one relationships with individuals with institutional affiliations, the initiative leveraged numerous talents and resources in its inaugural year. Without connections to University of Houston faculty, the initiative would not have realized the demonstration platform or solar art shed. HARC fueled the BayouVoices project. Houston Business Development, Inc. provided critically important meeting and event space, free of charge. Boesel connected the project to movers and shakers in city hall and coached them on effective language conventions for policy makers. The highly effective community celebration employed the collaborative brainpower of the Social Agency Lab, HNOMA, and the Houston Arts Alliance, in addition to core working group members. Blue explained that partnerships mesh all of the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative's activities; each adds value that she never would have gotten on her own.

What constitutes a partner, however, is often subjective. The NEA defines partners as organizations that combine resources and work together to make the project happen. It instructs that funders should not be counted as a partner, unless they actively participate. The main partners in the original proposal included the University of Houston, City of Houston, The Dawn Project, and OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority. The University of Houston contributed active participation through: collaborations and initiatives driven by faculty, the design and fabrication of artwork, and marketing support. At times, however, the project organizers voiced that the relationship felt more akin to fiscal sponsorship. Numerous agencies and City of Houston personnel have lent the project support, but even late in the process Spillette characterized an "official" partnership with the city as a work in progress. Blue's non profit, The Dawn Project provided her with a structure to accept funds from individual donors. When she initiated and led the project, she promoted her University of Houston affiliation more than her Dawn Project "hat." After the grant reduction, OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority's role was much more limited, though its involvement and approval of the demonstration platform, solar shed, and the proposed *Community Print Path* is critical.

In draft versions of the initiative's final NEA report form, it lists 14 organizational partners. Through interviews we learned that some representatives from these organizations did not consider the degree of their individual or institution's involvement to be at a level that constituted a partner, whereas others affirmed their commitment:

I don't see us as a full partner. We were much more of a resource. I came on mid-stream. In the next [Our Town grant] round, we will probably go for the money ourselves. We're more effective at moving into project phases. It's what we do.

– **Matthew Lennon**, *Houston Arts Alliance*

Most definitely we could be a future partner...Whatever we can do to help make things happen. If we can get words out to different circles, to different people about this community, and bring outside investments in...that's where I see our work in the future.

– **Keiji Asakura**, *Asakura Robinson*

The fact that the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative organizers and some affiliated organizations are not on the same page about their involvement is of concern. Project organizers may have misconstrued future levels of support.

Unfortunately, some relationships with stakeholders and/or partners have frayed. Some players felt the project's objectives or their roles had not been adequately articulated. Others grew disenchanting as the project evolved, and new priorities and interests overshadowed what initially attracted their involvement:

If we are talking about the park, there are a whole set of things we can talk about. It's another set of circumstances when you leave the park. We kind of felt like it was a bait and switch.

– **Jason McLemore**, *Greater Southeast Management District*

I dropped out of school, so to speak...when it didn't accomplish our interest...Once it evolved into studying and...didn't start moving towards creative engagement with people that can influence design and built pieces.

– **Anonymous Stakeholder/Steering Committee Member**

Despite the initiative's deep commitment to grassroots community empowerment, some interviewees discredited these efforts and failed to see them as legitimate:

The end is already decided. They're just looking for community backing to say, 'Look this is what the community wanted.'

– **Anonymous Stakeholder/Steering Committee Member**

It was all about the park at first. Then it became huge. This is like a monster. It is all connected with money. We don't know how we, or even the community, fit in. It became someone else's vision...I don't know what's going on. Who is the big benefactor? The community got lost in the bigger picture of someone else's master plan.

– **Anonymous Stakeholder/Steering Committee Member**

Although our sense is that these views stem from communication problems or frustration that the project's

scope shifted, such perceptions still jeopardize the project's standing. Organizers have an opportunity to rebuild trust and assuage these concerns.

The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative also sustained political turf issues and resistance to changing the status quo. One participant explained that, "the project area has languished, then Carroll comes in as a force of nature shaking stuff up, but not everyone likes that." For instance, the initiative had to repair relationships with a city council person after Maurice Cox criticized the site selection of the new library as not being close enough to the light rail stop. Blue puts the realities of the political system into perspective: "I've been told that if you bring in a million dollars into the community... a politician will tell you how it will be spent." Thankfully, now project leadership has a heightened awareness of these challenges. The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative plans to navigate them moving forward by vesting both the vision and its implementation with community residents. As Blue puts it, "We want to help community residents to be able to be effective in how they operate with politicians that say the money is going to be spent this way, and get changes to happen."

### ■ Implementation

The project organizers and community leaders are now grappling with moving from concept to reality. To advance, the initiative must address who will drive the plan forward and what their capacity is. Each tangible accomplishment, however, will fuel momentum and broad based support.

The strategic plan outlines that a community-based organization conceived during the planning process will shepherd implementation and fundraising. However, the committed cadre of community leaders and the project initiator and support consultants are in the midst of growing pains as they explore how – Will Blue continue to function as a driving force for the initiative, or just provide support during a transition period? Will resources be identified to secure support staff? If not, what are realistic expectations for a volunteer-driven initiative? Wagner, a lynchpin in the community leadership group expressed her concerns, "This group may be able to supply the steam for the engine, but staff will make it happen...The organizational structure is critical to taking the ball to the end zone. I cannot commit to doing all this without staff." Lennon cautions, "The biggest challenge is going to be continuity through this...If you hand it over to group with out skills for project management and administration and the process for making something succeed, it will be a frustrating experience for those people." However, the vision of a fledgling community-based organization advancing the plan's strategies also brings unique assets, as Asakura points out:

People resources are the most critical in making things happen – people convince city hall, convince stakeholders, and convince possible funders. It requires 10 strong people to say, "We want this." Outside people can't. I cannot say it. Well, I can but it doesn't carry. I don't live in that area.

The plan's supporters only expect broad based support to increase as tangible projects come online. The project organizers plan to coordinate temporary bike trail and farmers' market demonstrations. The public will be able to experience the artwork elements at the park and community garden at Palm Center when they are installed in early 2013. Beginning this fall, other smaller scale initiatives are also coming on line. These include a landscaping intervention, tree plantings in MacGregor Park, and the revamped BayouVoices and Southeast Houston Arts Initiative websites. The latter will feature interactive GIS mapping capabilities that display plans and public construction activities.

Time will tell to what extent the plan's strategies will be realized. Critics point out that narrow street real estate, particularly on Martin Luther King Boulevard with two lanes of traffic and light rail, challenges squeezing in a bike lane. But as Farber points out, "Carroll managed to get a lot of awareness out to the city. The talking is happening... Because people are aware of it, it will last." Southeast Houston Arts Initiatives supporters see even partial implementation as an important community benefit:

Even realizing the vision with one long block could make a huge improvement to the community. If the walkway happens, from the METRO stop to the Y – the planned sidewalk improvements are minimal, just a base level. To be able to come back to that area and add layers of enhancements – culture, history, the amount of shade. All of those things will be an incredible accomplishment.

– Patrick Peters, *University of Houston*

I think it's doable. Maybe not all the vision of bike paths and green spaces, but even if part of it's done, then I think that that's a victory.

– Minnette Boesel, *Mayor's Assistant for Cultural Affairs*

### ■ Recommendations for Project Organizers —

Moving forward, the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative must successfully navigate a number of critical challenges. Below, we summarize these challenges and offer recommendations for ways in which they might be successfully met.

1. Fundraising: develop infrastructure and don't just "follow the money."

Since, legally, the University of Houston is not able to serve as a fiscal agent, to be eligible for continued funds, organizers must identify a parent non profit organization, until such time as they form a unique non profit entity. Initiative leaders have already held exploratory meetings with prospective affinity organizations in the community. Secondly, while seeking resources, organizers should avoid opportunistic temptations that do not advance the strategies and values outlined in the strategic plan. Past shifts in the initiative's scope have alienated some stakeholders. Funding sources that result in significant further shifts may seriously undermine the initiative's legitimacy and local political will.



2. Invest in skilled communicators and communication tools.

Since numerous stakeholders struggled with the clarity and consistency of written communication pieces, project organizers can redress this weakness by recruiting a skilled writer/editor to the project. Similarly, they should pay attention to participant and internal feedback and prioritize the development of a vibrant and dynamic website, expand social media presence, and produce “leave behind” flyers.

3. Redress community engagement “holes” with Latinos, renters, and youth.

The yearlong engagement process has resulted in a strategic plan, which reflects community priorities. However, some demographic groups were underrepresented in the process. Moving into implementation, organizers should renew efforts to involve Latinos, renters, and youth. As the plan will be phased in incrementally, there will be opportunities to adapt it to better suit the interests of these constituents. The organizers have outlined three strategies to renew outreach efforts: engaging social work graduate students, by working through the schools, and by recruiting a youth/young adult liaison. A bilingual community organizer, that might bridge Latino and African-American communities, would strength these efforts.

4. Clarify what unique value artists bring to the initiative and pair with commensurate resources.

Since ambiguity around artists’ roles and resource constraints limited their involvement, moving forward, project organizers have an opportunity to reexamine the best ways in which artists can add unique value to Southeast Houston. The plan calls for new spaces for cultural programming, including an art fair and art and media installations. However, it lacks specifics other than that it desires installations that are culturally relevant, educational, and/or extend the experience into the digital/virtual realm. Through dialogue with artists, and stakeholder organizations, including the Houston Arts Alliance and OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority, organizers can flesh out how these installations would happen. Do area artists need additional training in creating public art and working with public authorities or is there already a thick labor pool of talented and trained artists? Will there be a competitive call for proposals? How would the works be funded, selected, and maintained? Are there future roles for artists beyond the installations, for instance helping craft demonstration projects or providing inspiration at community events? Clarifying expectations and providing even modest stipends would increase artists’ depth of commitment.

5. Nurture key relationships and cultivate new allies.

Champions advance and opponents derail strategies, therefore implementation hinges on nurturing key relationships. As a project evolves, some partnerships will no longer be a natural fit and new affinities will emerge. However, parting on good terms is absolutely critical when stakeholders’ institutions can block plan implementation or they have the ear of the “powers that be.” Project

organizers should follow up with steering committee members, one-on-one. They should ask for feedback about the project, ideas for how it could be strengthened, and if and how the goals align with the interests of that person’s institution or constituents.

Cultivating new allies is of equal importance. The strategic plan identifies over 30 organizations and agencies that have potential interests in and resources to bring to bear across six different plan content areas (see pages 24-25). To advance the plan’s strategies, the initiative’s leaders must actively explore where synergies lie and how to identify and leverage champions.

Initiative leaders have already held numerous follow-up meetings, with more on the docket. Through these meetings, they can solicit plan feedback, explore how its strategies might add value to that stakeholders’ institution and constituents, and discuss what roles he or she might play in advancing next steps.

6. Advance implementation by finding a viable leadership structure.

We wish to respect project organizers and core community leaders’ current explorations around organizational structure, expectations for volunteer-driven initiatives, and resources for staff support. From our vantage point, however, we feel Blue’s continued active involvement (beyond a transition period) may be necessary to sustain momentum. We also heed the counsel offered by interviewees that citizen volunteers may not be able to dedicate sufficient time or skills to advance implementation without the support of paid staff. A shared leadership model, does offer ethical benefits in terms of ensuring accountability to community residents and minimizing the initiator’s burnout and attrition. Many non profits meet similar challenges through boards of directors that fulfill governance responsibilities and volunteer time and skills on discrete initiatives. This might be an appropriate solution for the initiative.

We offer these recommendations as insights as to how the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative might best meet its specific challenges. Below, we offer lessons learned applicable to the broader creative placemaking field.

## ■ Key Takeaways for Creative Placemaking Funders and Practitioners

Through our analysis of the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative’s process, strengths, and challenges, we offer several key takeaways for the larger field of creative placemaking funders and practitioners. Creative placemaking encompasses a wide array of practices, including artist live/work developments, festivals, public art, creative economy initiatives, pop-up galleries, arts districts, and the use of arts to advance other functional domains from transportation to recycling. Those interested in creative placemaking planning processes and university-community collaborations will find the most direct comparability of experience. Since partnerships, however, form a core creative placemaking

tenant, as advanced by the NEA and ArtPlace, a wide swath of practitioners and funders may benefit from the initiative's lessons learned. Below, we expand on each of these broader insights.

### ■ **Initiators: Move Beyond Make or Break**

"Zealous nuts." That's how Project for Public Spaces characterizes individuals that get things done against all odds.

There is no cookie cutter template for an effective creative placemaking initiator, but individual passion and dedication does appear crucial for driving projects forward. Blue brought certain attributes to the table – determination, resourcefulness, intellectual curiosity, and an ability to connect people and cultivate opportunities. She sought out Spillette for his project organizing skills, political savvy, and pragmatism. The absence of other skill sets in core leadership – such as clear and consistent writers – hamstrung the project.

Because the strengths and weaknesses of individual leaders so heavily influence a project's character and odds of success, funders may wish to give additional weight and consideration to these factors when deciding in which projects to invest. For finalists, they might call references and probe the initiator's strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis the project.

Similarly, prospective creative placemakers should try to candidly self-assess their strengths and weaknesses. Do they have a compelling vision that a wide array of stakeholders could rally behind? How connected are they to political gatekeepers? Do they have community entrée? What is their leadership style – charismatic and highly visible, or someone who savvily advances the chess game behind the scenes? Is this project their main passion/focus, or are their attentions heavily divided? Do they have a track record of seeing projects through to completion? Have they successfully raised funds in the past? Leaders come in many styles, but through critical self-reflection, organizers can identify deficiencies and fill holes by recruiting others with specific talents to an initiative.

### ■ **Attracting Political Will: Balance the Holistic and Specific**

Creative placemaking efforts explore how a place's physical and social character can strategically be shaped around arts and cultural assets. It can animate public and private spaces, rejuvenate structures and streetscapes, improve local business viability and public safety, and bring diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired. With its broad-ranging possible outcomes, the initiative's project organizers and participants devoted considerable time and energy into understanding what creative placemaking meant and then, specifically, how they wanted to apply it to their local situation. The definition they arrived at emphasizes community empowerment, good design, and artistic and cultural enhancements:

The goal of the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative is to transform Southeast Houston through community-based

creative placemaking – empowering residents to bring values and community history to effect change through well-designed improvements to the physical environment enhanced by artistic and cultural expression projects.

The diligent soul-searching around creative placemaking resulted in a strategic plan that reflects community priorities and connects and enhances physical assets. However, some participants grew weary of broad explorations:

I think it was kept broad for too long. They lost us because of that...They wanted all of us to learn placemaking together. But a little hierarchy wouldn't hurt.

– **Anonymous interviewee**

We've talked about the meandering nature of it... My enthusiasm for what came out of it is, in part, thankfulness that we came up with something that seemed concrete at the end. I would encourage a more concrete premise with outcomes at the beginning.

– **Patrick Peters, University of Houston**

Prospective initiators of creative placemaking projects face a challenge. Ideas must be organic and broad enough to surface and embrace community directed priorities. They should exploit connections and synergies to attract a big political tent of stakeholders that can champion the cause. However a specific, compelling vision can sometimes more effectively attract and concentrate support. While there are no hard and fast rules on how to achieve an effective balance between the organic/holistic and specific/tangible, creative placemakers should regularly seek feedback from stakeholders. Good faith efforts need to strive for flexibility and openness, as well as consistency and commitment to the core vision that inspired and motivated the initial foray.

### ■ **Tell Your Story Clearly, Often, Through Multiple Modes**

Our evaluation role offered us a unique glimpse into the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative. We diligently tried to follow the project's developments to understand what it was and evaluate it effectively. The project's evolutions and the sheer number of events, activities, and spin-off projects continues to astound us. Through our interviews, we learned that even core working group members were not fully aware of the scope of activity happening under the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative's umbrella.

Creative placemaking practitioners, please tell your story! Even the best accomplishments will have limited impact, if people are not made aware of them. Loudly celebrate small, tangible milestones such as securing new funding, or the launch of a spin-off event. Clear communication, consistency of message, and regular updates allow initiatives to keep supporters in the fold and attract new ones. Press releases, websites, flyers, social media, blog posts, e-newsletters, and face-to-face/phone updates all can expand the visibility and reach of your efforts. Limited resources might tempt you to forgo a website, branded identity, or printed/designed flyers, but bear in mind that for the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative, such measures took a toll on community engagement. Free blogs and/or Facebook pages, if consistently updated, may

provide a cost-effective stopgap solution to a stand-alone website. Creative placemakers should plan for how they will tell their story – what modes are most effective for your target audiences? What will your budget allow and are there in-kind ways to augment it? How can you best exploit your strengths, be they writing, video interviews, or graphic design? How can you attract people with these skills to your initiative?

#### ■ Offer Hands-on, Generative Activities Throughout

In hindsight, both initiative project organizers and working group members wished they had offered more generative activities earlier and throughout the planning process, such as charrettes, the community celebration, or temporary demonstration events. While the listening sessions provided participants with a foundation of knowledge about the assets and challenges facing Southeast Houston, people were also just eager to get their hands dirty – listen less and contribute more:

People need to feel the experiential process...They spend half the time introducing people...show them something that translates; demonstrate options; provide hands-on, tangible creative processes that are tactile and visible. Right now it's a lot of talk.

– **Anonymous Stakeholder**/Steering Committee Member

In general, when dealing with communities, people are overly sensitive to figuring out identity versus activities that will reveal identity, stakeholders, and creatives that live there. I would move to activities at a more accelerated pace and offer more activities and less listening sessions.

– **Matthew Lennon**, *Houston Arts Alliance*

#### ■ Partnerships: Invest in Thorough, Upfront Explorations

Creative placemaking planning processes have inherently messy and unpredictable tendencies, and wonderful opportunities can arise through organic approaches. Because they also emphasize cross sector partnerships, however, thorough pre-project explorations lay a critical foundation for success. How would the proposal benefit different partners or their constituents? What skills and resources could each partner provide? What holes remain and how might other partners or hired outside talent augment the initiative? Given limited time and focus, it is all too tempting for co-partnering applicants to sign-off on a proposal and worry about the details only if and when they get funded. Out of recognition that many creative placemaking grant opportunities are highly competitive, funders that first invite a brief letter of interest and then a full proposal from a narrower tier of applicants minimize applicants' time costs, while encouraging competitive applicants to put in necessary time to vet their idea and its logistics. As with the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative, if a funding award is made considerably below that of the requested amount, the nature and scope of the project may radically shift. No applicant receiving only a fraction of what they requested wants to jump through more hoops to get it. However, funders that include a formalized process that confirms that all partners have revisited the revised project scope and are on the same page about their respective

interests, stakes, roles, and responsibilities within it, improve its prospects of success.

#### ■ Keep the Creative in Creative Placemaking

The perceived ambiguity around the role of artists in the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative pushes the question of how central arts and cultural assets must be for an effort to constitute creative placemaking, as opposed to another planning approach (albeit respected and/or effective). Artist Carrie Schneider reflected that the participants in the Spring 2012 iteration of the artist working group, "weren't sure if they were really supposed to get into it, and, if so, what they were going to get out of it. Or, if they were just there to satisfy an item." The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative also drew inspiration from the more established practice of placemaking, with its roots stemming from 1960s visionaries Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte. As applied by the Project for Public Spaces, "placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces... Placemaking capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, ultimately creating good public spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well-being...Placemaking is both a process and a philosophy."<sup>7</sup> The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative also overlaps with the tradition of advocacy planning, first advanced by Paul Davidoff in 1965, which features public participation as its central tenet, and encourages minority and under represented voices to be part of planning decisions. Creative placemaking is a rapidly evolving discipline, with funders, policy makers and practitioners, advancing alternative definitions.<sup>8</sup> The NEA houses the Our Town grant program within its design discipline and counts architects and designers as artist occupations. It was Maurice Cox, the former NEA design director, who first encouraged Southeast Houston Arts Initiative participants to shift their understanding of art to include not just traditional art objects (murals and sculptures), but also well designed spaces. The opportunities for arts and culture to advance other functional domains including transportation, planning, infrastructure, and workforce development, and vice versa is one of the things that most excites proponents. However, I strongly advocate that policy makers and funders continue to root creative placemaking in arts and cultural assets; that it is something more than placemaking initiatives that include some arts enhancements. Perhaps, "What is creative placemaking?" is as subjective a question as, "What is art." However, practitioners need to reflect and dialogue deeply to clarify what approach best meets the needs of their communities and to articulate the ways in which artists, or other arts and cultural assets can add unique and specific value to advance their objectives.

7 Project for Public Spaces, "What Is Placemaking?," PPS: Project for Public Spaces, n.d., [http://www.pps.org/reference/what\\_is\\_placemaking/](http://www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/).

8 Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, "Creative Placemaking 2.0," *GIAREADER*, Summer 2012.



## ■ Support Opportunities for Field Building

Lastly, Southeast Houston Arts Initiative's project organizers hungered for more opportunities to learn from their peers, and they are not alone. I frequently hear others, who try their hand at creative placemaking, clamor for more information about what has been effective elsewhere, why, and how it was accomplished. Blue and her colleagues went far beyond most to learn from leading thinkers and share those practices. They brought speakers to Houston to give presentations and seminars and sent delegations to conferences and workshops in California, Maryland, and New York. Through this case study evaluation, the initiative shares their experience with others, so that they can build upon it. Blue also wished for a grantee convening or orientation to have an opportunity to learn from others about what worked and what did not. Spillette suggested written case studies, online seminars and YouTube videos. To the degree that creative placemaking proponents can exchange ideas and information, both understanding and the practice itself can be strengthened.

This in-depth case study, adds to our understanding of the range of dynamics that underpin creative placemaking. Though it is just one window, it offers considerable insights, with broad implications for the field: the importance of leaders' attributes; the tensions around specificity of vision to attract political will; how critically important clear and consistent communication is to rally and deepen support; the value of hands-on generative explorations for public participation; defining partners' roles and objectives, especially up-front, to increase the odds of successful collaboration; the need to clarify artists and/or arts and culture activities' unique value and pair with appropriate support; and lastly, the interest in sharing lessons learned to improve the field of practice.

## Conclusions

The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative realized a staggering number of achievements. Most notably, a strategic planning process provided numerous opportunities for collaborative learning. The resulting plan advances healthy connectivity through a bike/hike trail that links areas assets and new spaces for cultural programming. The initiative also supported the development of three pilot artwork installations at the Park at Palm Center and its community garden. Asakura commented, "It's much more than anybody could anticipate. In reality, it's amazing how it got done."

How did it get done? By marrying a resourceful, curious initiator and a commitment to community empowerment. By cultivating collaborations with university professors and research centers, design and architecture groups, and community organizations. By courting buy-in and support from key agencies and area property owners. By connecting Southeast Houston to inspiring thinkers and practitioners from around the country. Through an innovative celebration that allowed community members to generate ideas on Southeast Houston's past, present and future through multiple modes of creative expression. Along the way, the project's scope contracted, and then grew back out; organizers grappled with funding reductions and shifts in

project partners' geographic focus, while honoring interests in larger, holistic connections. The initiative sustained a range of challenges – struggles to clearly convey objectives and limited communication resources; difficulty engaging Latino residents, youth, and renters, and mobilizing passion for the Park at Palm Center and creative placemaking; a lack of clarity around artists' roles, and funding and sustaining their involvement; and mixed success leveraging institutional partners and stakeholders. These challenges, as well as funding and arriving at a viable organization structure, will continue to influence the odds of successful implementation. We draw out overarching lessons from the initiative's strengths and challenges that can inform creative placemaking funders and other practitioners.

The project organizers and core working group members take pride in what the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative has accomplished. Fedrick felt that the project achieved its objectives "1000 percent." She said, "With that little money it is impressive...This money went a long way for Houston." They feel optimistic they will incrementally advance its strategies.

The ultimate proof will be in the pudding – to what degree will elements of strategic plan be implemented? Will they successfully advance healthy connectivity and/or other livability objectives? The initiative's initial impacts, however, provide a promising foundation from which to build. The planning process broadened a wide swath of Houstonian's perspectives on creative placemaking and the roles of arts and design. It advanced civic engagement by encouraging community members to actively shape their environment. It fostered interaction across sectors and institutions and between lay-people and design professionals. The demonstration platform, solar art shed, and *Community Print Path* artwork installations at the Park at Palm Center and its community garden are expected to promote interest in gardening and healthy eating, increase community investment in the park, invite dialog, and provide educational opportunities.

The Southeast Houston Arts Initiative has also already helped catalyze a number of spin-off initiatives. These include the youth architecture studio (a collaboration between HNOMA and Houston Texans YMCA); the youth-driven community mapping blog, BayouVoices; landscaping interventions and a tour of Brays Bayou for artists and residents. Blue sees this as strong evidence that the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative is "going beyond just the activity. It's building stepping stones to create this web that will allow things to be able to happen and continue to happen in this community." The degree of future political will and financial support will essentially determine how far and deep this web will permeate. Thorough its deep explorations of what creative placemaking is and how it can benefit Southeast Houston, the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative has demonstrated its sincere commitment to community empowerment, and critical self-learning. We look forward to watching the momentum build.

# Appendices

## ■ A. Interview and Focus Group Participants

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Name, affiliation, interview/focus group dates, (additional project working groups/roles)\*

### **Core Working Group**

#### Project Organizers and Consultants

**Carroll Blue**, University of Houston Center for Public History and the Dawn Project, March 5 and July 10, 2012 (SC, NMTPS, AC)

**Gwen Fedrick**, Grace Strategic Consulting, July 9 and 12, 2012 (CL)

**Steve Spillette**, Spillette Consulting, March 5 and July 6, 2012 (SC, NMTPS)

#### Community Leadership

**Cean Cotton**, July 9, 2012

**Roland Cotton**, The La Salette Place Civic Club, July 9, 2012 (AC)

**Dr. Teddy McDavid**, OST Community Partnership, July 9, 2012

**Preston Roe**, Super Neighborhood 68, March 5 and July 9, 2012 (SC)

**Paulette Wagner**, MacGregor Trails Civic Association, March 5 and July 9, 2012 (SC, NMTPS)

**Wilbert O. Taylor, Jr.**, University Oaks Civic Club, March 5 and July 9, 2012

#### Other Core Group Members

**Cedric Douglas**, Independent Architect, March 6 and July 10, 2012 (AC, GC)

**Breanna Cotton**, July 11, 2012 (YO)

**Krist Bender**, Houston Advanced Research Center, March 6 and July 12, 2012 (NM/DP, NMTPS, YO, TA)

**Patrick Peters**, University of Houston College of Architecture, July 10, 2012 (SC, NM/DP, NMTPS, AC)

### **Steering/Stakeholders Committee**

**Anonymous**, July 9, 2012

**Michelle Barnes**, Community Artist's Collective, March 7, 2012 (NMTPS, AC)

**Minnette Boesel**, City of Houston Mayor's Assistant for Cultural Affairs, March 5 and July 12, 2012 (AC)

**Pricilla Graham**, Houston Texans YMCA, July 9, 2012

**Jason McLemore**, Greater Southeast Management District, March 5 and July 9, 2012

**Theola Petteway**, OST/Almeda Corridors Redevelopment Authority, March 5 and July 12, 2012

**Minister Robert S. Muhammad**, NTE Planning Consultants and Muhammad Mosque No. 45, March 5, 2012

### **Other Interviewees**

**Anonymous**, March 6, 2012

**Keiji Asakura**, Asakura Robinson, March 6 and July 11, 2012 (NMTPS, TA)

**Karen Farber**, University of Houston Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts, July 10, 2012

**Jonathon Glus**, Houston Arts Alliance, March 7, 2012

**Robert Miles Kemp**, Variate Labs, July 12, 2012 (TA)

**Matthew Lennon**, Houston Arts Alliance, July 11, 2012

**Zakq Lockrem**, Asakura Robinson and Social Agency Lab, July 12, 2012

**Timothy Mose**, HNOMA, March 6, 2012 (NM/DP, NMTPS)

**Floyd Newsum**, Artist and Art Professor at University of Houston Downtown, March 6, 2012 (AC)

**Carrie Schneider**, Independent Artist, July 9, 2012 (GC)

**LaTanya Stevenson**, HNOMA, July 10, 2012

\*Additional project working groups/roles: Steering/Stakeholder Committee (SC); New Media/Design Professional (NM/DP); New Media and Technology for Public Space Committee (NMTPS); Artists' Council (AC); Community Leadership (CL); Youth Outreach (YO); Technical Advisors (TA); GoCREATE artists group (GC)



## ■ B. Survey on Southeast Houston Arts Initiative Public Events

**Survey Dates:** June 21 – July 18, 2012 **Mode:** Internet survey delivered online via Zoomerang

We emailed invitations to all attendees of Southeast Houston Arts Initiative public events, for which email addresses had been captured via sign-in sheets (155 individuals). To encourage participation, we sent three email reminders and offered respondents an opportunity to enter a drawing for four \$50 gift cards. Our final response rate was 22.7 percent (28 complete, 5 partials) out of 145 valid email addresses. Sign-in sheets indicate that 34 percent of our survey pool attended multiple events. The number of survey respondents that attended multiple events was only slightly higher, 36 percent. However, due to selection bias, survey findings may not be representative of the entire population of Southeast Houston Arts Initiative participants. Respondents may be among those more content, or dissatisfied, with the initiative or its public events. Our survey also fails to capture those that did not attend events, be it from lack of awareness, lack of interest, or other reasons.

Q1. In which of the following Our Town Southeast Houston events did you participate?	#	%
Brays Bayou Tour (October 1)	7	21
Maurice Cox's Creative Placemaking Seminars (November 17-18, held at Houston Arts Alliance and other venues)	10	30
Community Representatives Listening Session (January 17)	5	15
MacGregor Park/Bayous and Waterways Listening Session (February 13, held at Parks and Recreation headquarters)	14	42
Robert Miles Kemp's Interactive Architecture Seminar (February 24, held at the offices of Asakura Robinson)	8	24
Economic Development and Housing Listening Session (February 29, held at One Delta Plaza)	8	24
Community Institutions and Education Listening Session (March 20, held in Judge Burney's Court Room)	12	36
Transportation and Infrastructure Listening Session (April 3, held in Judge Burney's Court Room)	9	27
Organizational and Funding Capacity Listening Session (April 11, held in Judge Burney's Court Room)	11	33
Project for Public Spaces' Placemaking Seminar (May 11, held at Palm Center)	9	27
Workshop on Future Opportunities-Park at Palm Center and University of Houston (May 14, held at Palm Center)	11	33
Community Celebration and Workshop (May 19, held at Palm Center)	11	33
Design Charrette (May 31, held at Palm Center)	12	36

Q2. What motivated you to attend? Please select all that apply.	#	%
I presented on a topic.	8	24
I was interested in the content.	24	73
I was interested in the larger creative placemaking effort.	21	64
I wanted to contribute ideas to improve Southeast Houston/Greater Third Ward.	18	55
I went to support one of the presenters or organizers.	9	27
I was asked to go by a neighbor or community representative.	4	12
I went to network.	4	12
I wanted to learn new skills.	5	15
Other, please specify.	10	30

Q3. What discouraged you from attending more Our Town Southeast Houston events? Please select all that apply.	#	%
Unaware of other events	13	43
Uninterested in the topics	0	0
Thought the formats would be boring	0	0
Too busy with work and/or personal life	12	40
Inconvenient locations	0	0
Inconvenient times	6	20
Didn't know what the point of the event was	2	7
Didn't know what the goals were of the larger creative placemaking effort	1	3
Uninterested in supporting the larger creative placemaking effort	0	0
Past negative experiences with other studies and/or planning efforts	0	0
Other, please specify	7	23



**Q4. Please rate the degree to which you felt that Our Town Southeast Houston's events met the following objectives. Answer for all events in which you participated. The events helped...**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Opinion
expand knowledge and thinking about a range of important topics for Southeast Houston.					
#	1	1	14	15	1
%	3	3	44	47	3
inspire and spark community members' imaginations about opportunities for Southeast Houston.					
#	1	0	18	13	0
%	3	0	56	41	0
community members, artists, designers, and/or architects generate creative ideas for improving Southeast Houston.					
#	1	0	12	18	1
%	3	0	38	56	3
provide artists, designers, and/or architects with opportunities to learn new skills and ways of working.					
#	1	5	14	8	3
%	3	16	45	26	10
empower the Southeast Houston community through increased awareness about important issues.					
#	1	1	13	13	3
%	3	3	42	42	10
empower the Southeast Houston community through increased awareness of resources that could help them achieve their goals for community improvement.					
#	1	2	15	11	3
%	3	6	47	34	9
foster new connections between artists, architects, design professionals, new media practitioners, residents, and business people.					
#	1	2	11	14	4
%	3	6	34	44	12
designers and artists understand residents' perspectives.					
#	1	0	18	7	5
%	3	0	58	23	16
residents understand designers' and artists' perspectives.					
#	1	3	19	4	5
%	3	9	59	12	16
ensure that the larger creative placemaking strategic plan reflected the priorities of the Southeast Houston community.					
#	1	1	11	11	7
%	3	3	35	35	23

**Q5. Please feel free to share your thoughts on anything that you personally took away from the Our Town Southeast Houston events (for example contributions that you made or new impressions, insights, knowledge, or connections).**

**Q6. Please rate the relative strengths and weaknesses of Southeast Houston Our Town's events with regards to public participation. The events successfully engaged...**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Opinion
homeowners in Southeast Houston/Greater Third Ward.					
#	0	2	18	3	6
%	0	7	62	10	21
renters in Southeast Houston/Greater Third Ward.					
#	3	11	5	3	6
%	11	39	18	11	21
older residents and seniors.					
#	0	2	14	7	6
%	0	7	48	24	21
youth/young adults.					
#	2	5	13	4	4
%	7	18	46	14	14
artists.					
#	0	3	15	6	5
%	0	10	52	21	17
practitioners of digital technology, social Internet media, and website design.					
#	0	2	13	8	3
%	0	8	50	31	12
professionals working in architecture, design, or planning.					
#	0	0	13	13	3
%	0	0	45	45	10
government officials.					
#	1	4	10	7	5
%	4	15	37	26	19
representatives of civic clubs and self-improvement groups.					
#	0	0	12	14	2
%	0	0	43	50	7
representatives of community schools and other civic institutions.					
#	0	3	13	7	6
%	0	10	45	24	21
faith communities.					
#	0	8	8	3	8
%	0	30	30	11	30
leaders in the Southeast Houston/Greater Third Ward business community.					
#	0	3	16	4	6
%	0	10	55	14	21
African Americans/people of African descent.					
#	0	0	12	15	2
%	0	0	41	52	7
people of Latino, Hispanic, or Chicano racial/ethnic identities.					
#	3	9	7	3	7
%	10	31	24	10	24

**Q7. Please feel free to tell us more about public participation in Our Town Southeast Houston's events, including what worked, opportunities for improvement, and/or specific suggestions for others attempting similar work in the future. You may include comments about groups not listed above.**

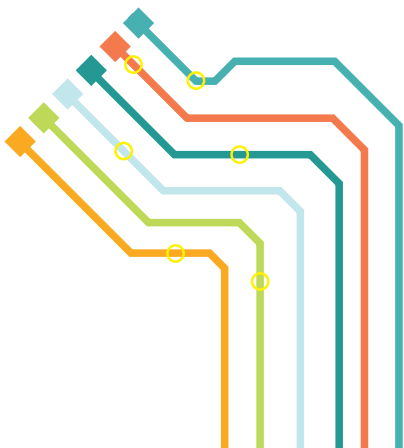
**Q8. Please rate the Our Town Southeast Houston listening sessions and other events with regards to content.**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Opinion
The listening sessions' topics covered the most important issues facing the Southeast Houston community.					
#	0	2	9	9	7
%	0	7	33	33	26
The placemaking seminars exposed the Southeast Houston community to new thinking from national experts.					
#	0	1	12	9	5
%	0	4	44	33	19
I was engaged by the speakers and inspired by the topics.					
#	0	0	10	12	5
%	0	0	37	44	19
I felt satisfied with the balance between discussing current issues/needs and providing opportunities to work towards solutions.					
#	0	0	12	9	6
%	0	0	44	33	22

**Q9. Please rate the following suggestions for ways in which the Our Town Southeast Houston events might have been improved.**

	Not important	2	3	Neutral	5	6	Very important	No Opinion
More discussion among presenters								
#	3	0	2	8	2	6	3	2
%	12	0	8	31	8	23	12	8
More discussion between audience members and presenters								
#	1	0	0	2	7	9	6	2
%	4	0	0	7	26	33	22	7
More discussion among audience members themselves								
#	0	0	1	7	5	9	3	2
%	0	0	4	26	19	33	11	7
More hands-on projects								
#	2	0	1	3	8	6	6	1
%	7	0	4	11	30	22	22	4
More artist-led interactive experiences								
#	0	1	1	4	7	8	5	1
%	0	4	4	15	26	30	19	4
More take-home materials								
#	1	3	0	10	8	2	2	1
%	4	11	0	37	30	7	7	4
More posting of content on a website/blog								
#	0	0	0	6	5	0	15	1
%	0	0	0	22	19	0	56	4
More use of social media to continue dialogue								
#	0	1	0	3	4	5	13	1
%	0	4	0	11	15	19	48	4
More inspiring venues								
#	1	0	2	9	1	6	5	3
%	4	0	7	33	4	22	19	11

**Q10. Please feel free to share your thoughts on which offerings were the most valuable to you. For future similar efforts, would you propose any alternative or complementary activities? If so, what?**



Q11. Which of the following describes you? Please select all that apply.	#	%
Live in Southeast Houston/Greater Third Ward	7	25
Work in Southeast Houston/Greater Third Ward	9	32
Own or manage a business/commercial property in Southeast Houston/Greater Third Ward	4	14
Representative of a civic club or self-improvement group	5	18
Leader in the business community	2	7
Artist	4	14
New media practitioner	3	11
Professional working in architecture, design, or planning	16	57
Government official	1	4
Representative of a community school or other civic institution	1	4
Other, please specify	6	21

Q12. If you wish to enter the drawing for four \$50 gift cards, or receive follow up information on this evaluation, please check the boxes that apply and provide contact information below.

Q13: Optional contact information for \$50 drawing and/or mailing list.

