In 2014, Rick Lowe was inducted as a MacArthur “Genius” Fellow for his role as founder of Project Row Houses, affirming and raising the international profile of the institution. Many have held it up as the model for the burgeoning “social practice” and “creative placemaking” movements within the art world, but Lowe himself has raised critical questions about those associations.

How then should we talk about Project Row Houses? Walter Hood and Carmen Taylor essay a new language to describe the PRH model.
In his book *The New Vision*, published in 1938 to inform laymen and artists about the foundation of Bauhaus education, László Moholy-Nagy writes, “Everyone is talented. Every healthy man has a deep capacity for bringing to development the creative energies found in his nature, if he is deeply interested in his work.” Moholy-Nagy’s assertion that every person has a “deep capacity” to express creativity encapsulates the value and mission of Project Row Houses (PRH) in the Third Ward of Houston.

Stark white row houses adorn two neighborhood blocks, with a wide street separating them from an empty parking lot. When we arrived on a weekday, the street was quiet. There were a few people in the brick administration building on the corner, located next to the row houses. A teenager sat at a table inside doing homework. The space felt both empty and alive; its design was somewhat modest, furnished like a small home office.

Neither a bustling neighborhood nor a fallow or neglected one, the site of Project Row Houses is a place that negotiates the stratum of change. In 1993, Rick Lowe and a group of artists began renovating 22 abandoned shotgun houses on the two-block site, forming PRH. The project, which Lowe launched to bring art into the life and maintenance of the neighborhood, has been engaging participants’ creativity through rehabilitation, housing develop-
ment, and art practice for the past 20 years. With artist-in-residence programs, low-income housing projects, and a laundromat and other business ventures focused on the occupations and talents of people who live in the Third Ward, PRH has advocated for a resilient neighborhood within Houston’s constant development.

This April, Lowe spoke at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, explaining his art practice and the ideas that surrounded the creation and continuation of PRH. He discussed the significance of giving value, appreciation, and dignity to ordinary people. Through his examples of how recognition of the ordinary acts and practices of the Third Ward neighborhood have established its value, Lowe suggested the importance of acknowledging that around the corner you may meet the next great chef or a budding entrepreneur. Lowe was first drawn to the shotgun houses of PRH for their ordinariness but also, most importantly, because people couldn’t see their worth. Through his art practice, Lowe has discovered that he can help people living in and outside of the Third Ward see the value of this place.

At PRH, validation of neighborhood worth manifests in many ways. One man in the Third Ward loves to barbeque. His enthusiasm, recognized by PRH, garnered an ad campaign to promote his food, affirming his skill and presence. Cookie Love, a woman who made money by doing people’s laundry, now works from an established laundromat called Cookie Love’s Wash ‘n Fold. And Assata Richards, a participant in PRH’s Young Mothers Residential Program, later earned a Ph.D., became a board member of the housing authority, and has run for the Houston City Council. During our visit, a man rode by on a bike with music blasting and lights flashing. Lowe walked up and asked, “Do you live here?” And just like that, the music man became a newly befriended neighbor.

Neither a studio practice nor a temporary social art installation, PRH is a cultural institution. By fostering a space that is inclusive of its geographic context and people, Lowe has created a kind of museum that is shaped and maintained by cultural practices. Art actions here are idiosyncratic, unique to their locality, and relate directly to the place they occur rather than to the place where they are housed (as is the case in a typical art museum setting). In the Third Ward, “cultural practices” are those everyday actions valued as art, whether they are culinary, sculptural, or celebratory. Similarly, Lowe’s art is a cultural practice, to give it a new moniker. One that is both reflective and active in engaging the arts with daily life.

Often discussed as one of the most successful of emergent “social art practices,” PRH confronts the critique of social art’s function. In an article for the International Socialist Review, Ben Davis asks, “Is this strand of art a starting point for addressing social problems, or a distraction that keeps us from seeing their true extent?” One response is that such art is not necessarily about solving social problems. Instead of asking how art can solve a housing crisis, a drug war, or a homeless problem, artists should address a different question: how can art validate and encourage people to define themselves in the world? Art can be a vehicle for empowerment outside the boundaries of bureaucratic malaise. PRH’s foray into CDC (Community Development Corporation) housing, for example, emerged from Lowe’s recognition of a need for local housing and the idea that as an art institution, PRH could work with a traditional institution like Rice University to develop housing on PRH property. The addition of new housing to the PRH site bolstered the social nature of the art institution. But as the
CDC expanded its housing development to other sites not contiguous with PRH, Lowe decided to separate the CDC from the PRH art institution, a move that sheds light on the limits of agency in social art practices. Development becomes less about art and more about business and finance. The “power of art” in this context is diminished when it becomes subservient to other imperatives.

Gentrification is a real concern in places like the Third Ward, and artists are often a major harbinger of the arrival of new wealthier residents. PRH, however, demonstrates how artists can be part of what is already there. Artists didn’t discover row houses and Rick Lowe didn’t discover the Third Ward. He instead saw people living in a place and decided to become part of their lives.

A cultural art practice, unlike a social art practice, is about time and investment. Many social art practices provide commentary on social issues, but they engage with place as the setting for the art, not as the site of an intended physical transformation. Take, for example, Suzanne Lacy’s orchestrated works; they are powerful events that leave a lasting memory—and lead to possible consequent actions—but they are somewhat ambiguous in terms of site transformation. In contrast, the culture of Project Row Houses demands that engagement be constant and ongoing. Culture, with its semantic roots in the act of “cultivating,” suggests an artist’s and institution’s engagement in the production of both art and life. This engagement occurs daily through nurturing and caring for a place and its people, and connecting their patterns and practices to a larger purpose, whether that is spiritual, communal, or inspirational. A cultural practice can be articulated as a triad of active engagement with the everyday and mundane, with a community’s lifeways, and with acts of commemoration. PRH fosters practices in its community that reinforce this triad of allegiances.

THE EVERYDAY AND MUNDANE
The museum today is most commonly associated with an institutional practice that is scripted and procedural, choosing which artists to exhibit and validate, therefore elevating the worth of their work and name. Project Row Houses suggests a different museum model, one where ordinary actions and events are valued by both the spectator and the performer or art-
ist. PRH’s cultural practice asserts that we are enriched spiritually through the everyday and mundane. Awareness of the everyday instills in us a sense of passing time, our obligations, and the remarkable skills we activate for daily routines. By recognizing the mundane, PRH demonstrates how a museum structure can form a prosenium for daily life. Organizationally, PRH and traditional art museums have a similar structure in that each has gallery spaces where revolving art installations are displayed. Programmatically, they also have fellowships, residencies, boards of directors, and funding streams in common. Yet what makes PRH extraordinary is its ordinariness. The row houses themselves are art; people live and play in these spaces. Art is intertwined with the condition of the neighborhood. Like John Bigger’s painting Shotgun, Third Ward # 1, where mothers wearing dresses stand in front of the Third Ward row houses and children are playing in the street, PRH is as much about the idea of “place” as it is about its buildings or objects.

In this sense, PRH’s physical, social, and cultural manifestation and its actions are the antithesis of the normative museum structure. Neither an institutional campus nor a single objectified building, PRH is a continuous presence that validates both its community and its neighborhood. People and art coexist, expressing the realities of daily life. PRH allows one to imagine living in a different sort of art museum. What if you could touch the art? Or have sculpture, painting, and performances in your backyard?

PRH encourages nuanced community participation, the opportunity to watch what is happening every day. The English language lacks a word or phrase to describe this experience of engaging in everyday observations associated directly to actions or places, but the Italian word guardare comes close, associating stillness and mindfulness with the act of watching. This sense of guardare in the Third Ward—watching a neighbor doing laundry or mowing the lawn—introduces the concept of watching everyday occurrences as the means to curate an event without reframing the subject. Whereas an art museum curates an exhibition by reframing art in a gallery for a viewer, PRH validates watching as a curatorial act and the practice of living as art. Understanding ordinariness is art. PRH’s role is facilitating observation of the ordinary for the neighborhood, its people, and its visitors.

As we repeat our mundane acts day after day, they leave a cultural trace. These traces, like the stream of lights that mark evening rush hour on the freeway, are ritualized in evanesces, like the stream of lights that mark evening neighborhoods, its people, and its visitors. Understanding ordinariness is art. PRH’s role is facilitating observation of the ordinary for the neighborhood, its people, and its visitors.

During our visit to Project Row Houses, we saw two installations that were striking in their ability to showcase the mundane. The first, a storefront in one of the shotguns, resembled a familiar neighborhood corner store. We walked in the house to find a group of women eating their lunch. The artist-in-residence, Michelle Barnes, explained that she was setting up a space for women in the neighborhood to sell their art. Hand-sewn dolls, homemade cupcakes, earrings, and paper cranes were on display, eclectic and wide ranging in their references. The second installation, Lovie Olivia’s Material-ies, was in another row house a few doors down from the shop. It featured the findings of an “archeological dig” beneath the row houses—old bottles, toothbrushes, and other household debris were displayed like precious items uncovered from the neighborhood’s past. At some point, the children around the street must have been in that crawl space first! Both installations evoked the particular familiarity of home—a bricolage, ad hoc aesthetic born from both practical and creative construction, which often brings unrelated things together.

In the late nineteenth century, Houston’s founders divided Houston into a ward system having six political and geographic districts. One morning over breakfast, Lowe explained the ward system to us. He took his pancake and cut it into six triangles. “This is the basic idea,” he said, showing us the pancake, now sliced like a pizza pie. “Each segment neighborhood pinwheels around the center.” This formal idea of compact neighborhoods emanating from a center point has since been disrupted by infringing freeways and speculative developments that cut across the wards, eroding their pattern. Along with the disappearance of the wards’ formal boundaries has come a major change in Houstonians’ way of life. The original wards have become a set of decentralized neighborhoods bounded by large-scale infrastructure, a vast plane where patterns of life are difficult to make sense of.

Houston is a city of “a third kind,” as former Rice School of Architecture Dean Lars Lerup poetically writes in One Million Acres and No Zoning. In this “restless middle landscape,” a lack of shared space and a predominately motorized urban area lead to a particularly ambiguous way of life. Lifeways, a term that denotes the type of daily patterns people practice in a place, depend on the scale of a neighborhood, whether the place is urban or rural, etc. As these everyday rituals grow ever more indistinct within Houston’s constant transformations, lifeways here are increasingly dominated by the city’s infrastructure.

In this context, Project Row Houses offers a different model for viewing the lifeways of the Third Ward. If lifeways are the types of daily patterns people practice in a place, then a cultural practice may suggest how a change in place’s environmental, physical, and spatial morphology can impact these daily patterns. Sometimes this change may be advocated for, encouraged, self-selected, and managed by the community. But oftentimes change emanates from the outside, from the influence of others. In PRH’s case, the change managed and self-selected by Rick Lowe and his supporters serves a pedagogical purpose. The initial transformation of the row houses, which deliberately

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embraced by those who are here (and want to be here). Supportive of mothers and their children, it encourages day-to-day exchanges between neighbors, the constant acknowledgment of neighborhood history through creative practices, and shared local knowledge through simple acts. Even new townhouse developments within a few blocks of the row houses do not seem out of place: PRH does not advocate for things around it to be homogeneous. It is more concerned with the life that emerges from a diverse grouping of people. PRH views its collection of buildings as precious, but it also maintains a strong separate identity, acknowledging that other things can come in and add to the neighborhood’s story without distracting from its own goals and mission. This identity is increasingly important as the Third Ward faces the challenges of gentrification; PRH’s success has attracted a new gentry. Lacking a master plan for neighborhood development, PRH’s open and incremental approach instead is shaping the dynamics of the neighborhood. PRH plays a powerful role, and its potency lies in its ability to be continuously present—not to calcify into ruins or grow static. This allows an evolving community stage to serve as a conduit between existing residents and new populations moving into the Third Ward. With attention from the international art world and New York Times readership, PRH draws a wide range of visitors, putting it in the curious position of bringing together a mix of people who might not otherwise find themselves in the Third Ward.

Emancipation Park, a few blocks from Project Row Houses, was Houston’s first public park. It began with 10 acres of land, bought by a group of former slaves to celebrate June-tenth, a date that marks when Texas slaves found out that they were free. As reported by Lisa Gray in the Houston Chronicle, now a $33 million renovation plan is underway to make the park a “national landmark.” As development interest moves into the Third Ward, future construction plans like this dot the neighborhood. Yet, Lowe holds to his belief in the value of ordinary, everyday experiences and maintains that this change too can exist alongside PRH. It just means that another layer of time and culture will emerge and shape the neighborhood lifeway. By working with, rather than against, developments like Emancipation Park, PRH is part of the changes in its own neighborhood. Lowe says that he is committed to focusing on PRH’s mission, and he regards what is out of PRH’s control as a matter of negotiating forces. In many ways, PRH has become an institutional nucleus for the Third Ward, from which its value in people and their histories emanate. The power of Lowe’s cultural practice comes from its advocacy for cultural establishments that Lowe described in an interview for the Spring 2010 issue of BOMB Magazine as “articulated by a collection of people independent of the whim or taste of the powerful.”

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[There has to be that interval of neglect, there has to be discontinuity; it is religiously and artistically essential. That is what I mean when I refer to the necessity for ruins: ruins provide the incentive for restoration, and for a return to origins…. the landscape has to be plundered and stripped before we can restore the natural ecosystem; the neighborhood has to be a ruin before we can rediscover it and gentrify it. That is how we reproduce the cosmic scheme and correct history.

—J.B. Jackson, The Necessity for Ruins

COMMENORATION

When Project Row Houses began, the 22 run-down shotgun houses that Lowe and his group restored and painted white were in a neglected area, struggling with the depredation of drugs and prostitution. For that reason, the Third Ward and these row houses spring to mind when reading J.B. Jackson’s thoughts about the return to origins and the need for ruins. Restoration of a “ruin” brings a remote past suddenly into the present, where it becomes real. The shotgun house has undergone a well-documented transformation by John Michael Vlach and others from its origins in West Africa to the African diaspora’s construction of similar dwellings in the United States. This building type appeared on rural and urban sites, homes to slaves and indentured servants. These houses were small, cramped, and simply constructed. The people occupying them did not herald the houses as special abodes—they were akin to the one-room cabin. Bringing back the shotgun house today recalls its origins, its epoch, and its cultural setting, and this is what is remembered, not the wooden boards and slates or the narrowness of the building. Now the houses represent the stories of the people that once lived in them and why.

By preserving and restoring the physical row house, Lowe and PRH commemorate how people have lived in Houston over the past 150 years without having to post signage, give tours, or write narratives. Lowe’s work makes a bold statement about renewal. If his practice reproduces the cosmic scheme and corrects history, the progression of history is from shotgun house to art institution. What a great correction to build—from worker housing to a cultural establishment. At PRH, the correction of history occurs every time an installation goes up, every time there is a new resident, every time a single mother gets a Ph.D. The ruin is primary to renewal—and unlike Jackson’s normative view of succession, from slum to gentrification, the physical object of the row house makes this succession cultural. People may choose to gentrify the area or not; change in the neighborhood may be managed or organic. Since renewal is cultural, not everyone’s return to origins is the same. PRH asserts that ruins matter to the future and that bringing back the ruins in our life is necessary for renewal. Art is presented and maintained through the lens of memory!

The Third Ward is the muse for PRH; it is the inspiration for the art—it is the inspiration for the artist. By taking this place as its muse, a different type of museum has developed, one where nothing is collected, but everything is curated—people’s lives, experiences, and stories shape the common knowledge of the Third Ward. The irony of this approach is that artists have always had muses and many have also been inspired by place—landscapes, countries, cities, and neighborhoods like Black Mountain, South Africa, South America, Paris, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, and Harlem. For PRH, perhaps, the muse is home—the neighborhood that returns us to a new origin, a corrected history seen through the lens of ordinary people’s lives. As a cultural art practice, PRH demonstrates that by placing value on the everyday and mundane, on a community’s lifeways, and on the commemoration of people and place, art becomes a significant framework, able to shape and improve daily life. Lowe’s practice asserts that community change is inevitable, but that alternative possibilities exist within this change to our neighborhoods and cities. A cultural art practice engages history while creating a vibrant context for the future within the present condition of a place. This future context is one where the detritus of the past is not swept clean, but rather nurtured through its decay and resurrected in the constant dynamic of everyday life. Residents old and new contribute to these everyday experiences; new developments are always in conversation with the past. PRH’s legacy, then, will only continue to grow and change as it is shaped by the passing of time, recognizing the life of the Third Ward as art itself. ■