

# prh

**Do you consider Project Row Houses (PRH) as a kind of museum? What in your opinion is the art museum's cultural and social mission in general today, and how does PRH fit or not in that mission?**

**Linda Shearer:** Yes, I absolutely consider PRH to be a museum, a living museum, and in fact a model for the museum of the future. I have observed art museums evolve from an object-based mission (acquisition, conservation, research, documentation, etc.) to an audience-based mission (need to address changing demographics, issues of diversity, relevancy, etc.). The next phase in my mind is a community-based museum—which will not necessarily look like the art museums of today. As hard as museums attempt to reach new audiences who do not have regular opportunities to visit museums, it can't really be done without being *in* the community. The notion of "outreach" is a fundamentally flawed one and only underscores the privileged nature that allows one to "reach out," and not in. PRH is unique in that it addresses the whole person; Joseph Beuys's concept of "social sculpture" is totally appropriate for PRH—a work of art does not have to be an object on a wall or pedestal. It can be the dynamics of an interaction that takes place between an artist from New York City, for example, and one of the women in PRH's Young Mothers Residential Program (YMRP) where a mutual sense of creativity or aspiration can be shared. PRH sees the setting as critical to the creative experience: relevant architecture (historical and contemporary) goes hand in hand with the arts, education, creating a safety net with the YMRP, and affordable housing.

Traditional museum design has largely echoed temples and churches, which have for the most part been uninviting and intimidating to those who are not familiar or comfortable with visiting museums. Contemporary architecture has attempted to mitigate that barrier by taking a more open and inclusive approach. Nonetheless, that shift has not really addressed the perception of privilege and exclusivity, and the pragmatic issue of security. PRH has neither security nor climate control; it invites visitors to walk the entire site, look at the Art Houses and the public art located throughout the site, talk to the individuals they encounter, see the streets and green spaces—in short, to experience firsthand the nuanced role of art within the community and neighborhood of the historic Third Ward.

**What do you feel is the best relationship between architecture and art?**

**LS:** Having worked for 11 years at the Guggenheim Museum in my early 20s, I have a rather unusual interpretation of that relationship! The most successful exhibitions were those that interacted with the architecture. Needless to say, that was mostly sculpture or site-specific work; paintings fared far less well in those curved bays and terrazzo ramps inclined at a three degree angle. For some years now, they have focused more and more on site-specific installations, as with the recent Turrell extravaganza. I also worked at Zaha Hadid's Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, where similar issues dominated. At PRH some of our most compelling projects are those where the artist is responding directly to the architecture (and history) of the shotgun-style house, like Sean Shim-Boyle, for example. So when there is harmony between the art and the architecture, that is moving; but when the art pushes back against and challenges the architecture, that can also be exciting.

**How would you describe your architectural approach regarding the preexisting buildings? Do you anticipate a shift in that moving forward?**

**LS:** Given their architectural importance, like the shotgun-style houses or the Eldorado, our approach is to honor their history and preserve them as best as we possibly can. Some buildings do not stand up to the test of time, but the ones that do are precious to PRH. And no, I do not foresee a shift in that approach. For example, the shotgun-style houses do not need improvements, as far as I am concerned. They do, however, need to be maintained. Three years ago we were able to replace the roofs on 15 of the houses; that had become an urgent need because the 80-plus-year-old houses were leaking badly with any heavy rain. Between the young mothers living in five of them and art being installed in eight of them, it was critical the roofs be fixed. As for the Eldorado, ideally we would return it to its original facade, as well as bring it up-to-date with state-of-the-art equipment—projection capabilities, theatrical sound and lighting, an elevator, and handicap accessibility in general. The Ballroom was built before air conditioning, and the windows all opened to the street; now they are considerably smaller and do not open. The facade has been greatly compromised over the years; it would be a dream to return it to its former design.

**Have you found anything particular about realizing a project in Texas?**

**LS:** I always think back to Toby Kamps's "No Zoning" exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. The combination of no formal zoning regulations with a certain lack of caution and a Texas Wild West, can-do attitude creates an atmosphere whereby the realization of projects is entirely feasible. Of course, it depends on the nature of the project: is it indoors or outdoors; is it on PRH property or not; is the space abandoned or actively functioning; are licensed professionals needed or can it be accomplished by staff; does it need permits or not; are local or out-of-town artists involved; do we have the funding to complete it? If the answers to these questions are self-evident, then you're at least on your way. I think it's fair to say that some projects need to be done stealthily and at night, if possible!

For example, we received a Texas Historic Marker in 2011 for the corner of Dowling and Francis Streets where the famed Houston blues musician Sam Lightnin' Hopkins (1912—1982) would regularly catch the #80 bus. Our plan had always been to commission an artist to create a bus stop dedicated to Hopkins. Terry Adkins (1954—2014) had organized a Round of Art Houses at Project Row Houses in 2008 dedicated to Lightnin' Hopkins, so he was the logical artist. We received funding for the project from the New York-based Nathan Cummings Foundation, but Terry was always too busy to concentrate on it. Between delays and his unexpected death in 2014, we turned to a local Houston artist, Robert Hodge, based in the Third Ward. His studio is on PRH property, immediately adjacent to the site of the existing bus stop. We did not request or receive Houston Metro's permission to build a bench next to the Marker referencing Hopkins; it was completed in 2014 and is now actively used by people waiting for the bus, as well as local residents looking for a place to sit. In other words, it was a project that evolved over the course of nearly six years. Would it have happened sooner in another part of the country? Not necessarily.

Of course, we have been enormously fortunate to have partnered on numerous collaborations with the Rice Building Workshop. And while some projects take longer than others, Nonya Grenader and Danny Samuels, the co-directors, make sure everything runs like clockwork. They are working on an academic schedule with concrete deadlines, so there is little room for delays.

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**Rice Building Workshop:** Project Row Houses (PRH) is less a museum than an active catalyst of social art in the community. In that regard, architecture, beginning with the shotgun houses themselves and including all the Rice Building Workshop work, is a part of it, but not the most significant.

Our role as architect is part of a very large collaboration involving over 500 students, responding to the ideas and needs of a fascinating client (PRH). Along the way, there have been numerous consultants, material suppliers, contributors, and volunteers. In addition, we have had the critical support of Rice School of Architecture.

Since our first meeting with Rick Lowe (18 years ago), we have responded to certain PRH needs—from programs to create houses for young families in the PRH community to making living spaces for visiting artists and artists-in-residence. Some of our design/build projects were for new, affordable housing and some focused on the adaptive reuse of original housing stock. Residential projects have ranged in scale from 500 to 900 square feet. And there were other needs resulting in design work at a greater scale—from duplexes, to commercial space, to neighborhood planning issues.

We have learned a great deal from PRH—not only the wisdom and presence of the place itself but also, from the people at PRH and the larger neighborhood. During our 18 years together, we have watched families evolve, kids grow up, and some elders pass away—all against a vibrant backdrop of PRH programs with art and music and conversation. And we haven't even touched on various forces of change that happen in a city.

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*Linda Shearer, Executive Director of Project Row Houses, and Nonya Grenader and Danny Samuels of Rice Building Workshop responded to similar questions via email.*