



A Cultural Plan for Houston's African American Communities

Houston Museum of African American Culture
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Despite the hard fought battle to establish an African American museum in Houston, such cultural asset that exists in every other major and mid-sized city in the country, a review of the city's African American cultural assets over the past five years indicate no growth at best and a slide back at worst for Houston's African American cultural assets.

Since the end of 2013, Houston's African American community has lost two venerable African American cultural institutions. The Museum of Cultural Arts Houston (MOCAH) and Black Heritage Gallery shuttered their doors after a combined 52 years of service to the Houston community. These events followed the closure of two post offices and five Houston Independent School District schools in our neighborhoods. Fearing the neighborhood blight which the school and post office closures would cause, elected officials, the NAACP, and community advocates organized in opposition. However, our community's response to the funding challenges of our city's African American cultural assets has been less passionate. That has to change.

Point No. 1: Many African American neighborhoods in Houston are stuck in intergenerational poverty and economic disadvantage.

New York University professor Patrick Starkey, in *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress toward Racial Equality*, cites the over 70 percent of African American children raised in the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods a generation ago now raising their own children in similar circumstances. "The persistence of intergenerational poverty and economic disadvantage," he writes, "is thus inextricably linked to location and place." Consider Houston's Sunnyside neighborhood, historically segregated with little political clout and neglected public services, as a contemporary example of a "stuck in place or decline" neighborhood, where current public policy is either misguided and not working or in need of additional programmatic efforts.

Point No. 2: Cultural Assets Affect High Opportunity

Neighborhoods that are characterized by safer streets, good schools, greater levels of civic involvement and access to better jobs, in public policy terms are "high opportunity" neighborhoods, where these factors act to alleviate income inequality and help halt the cycle of poverty. Leading social and economic analysts like the University of Pennsylvania's Social Impact of the Arts Project's Mark J. Stern would add the existence of cultural assets to the list of characteristics of high opportunity neighborhoods. In his *Rethinking Social Impact: We Can't Talk about Social Well-being without the Arts & Culture*, the research found "the presence of cultural assets in urban neighborhoods was associated with economic improvements, including declines in poverty, " in addition to finding the arts to be associated with preserving ethnic and racial diversity, reduced ethnic and harassment rates and lower rates of social distress.

Point No. 3: Houston's Arts and Culture Funding Model Does Not Allow For Adequate Funding And/or Sustainability of African American and Latino cultural institutions.

The Center for Houston's Future (CHF) 2014 Arts and Cultural Heritage study indicated what is universally known; that is, while the Houston region benefits from an exceptionally generous body of supporters, cultural and ethnic awareness organizations account for less than 2 percent of the total revenue secured by the arts and culture sector as a whole. When tracking gains in total revenue among Houston's arts and cultural nonprofits, the CHF study found that while contributions increased by more than 80 percent over the decade previous to the study, nearly 88 percent of the increased contributions went to just 27 organizations, representing five percent of the total number of arts and cultural nonprofits. Public funding falls way short of the national average, and even shorter for African American assets. For example, the Houston Museum of African American Culture (HMAAC), is the ONLY such museum in a major or mid sized city that does not have its building and annual operating budget funded publicly as a public good. This past year funding for African American cultural institutions, including the Community Artists Collective, the Urban Souls Dance Company, the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum, Project Row Houses, the Ensemble Theatre, the Shrine of the Black Madonna and the Texas Center for African American Living History, actually decreased while demand from the underserved African American community increased.

Point No. 4: Excerpts from the City of Houston Cultural Plan, Which Acknowledges Deficits in Funding for African American Institutions, But Does Not Specifically Address Them.

Equity was raised in every meeting about the Plan, from a need for more fairness in how the City allocates its cultural investments, to residents' ability to access Houston's cultural sector, with community residents asking for more affordable cultural experiences, opportunities to participate in the arts **where they live** and more arts education in the schools. The Plan indicated that strong cultural policies ensure fair treatment in allocating public resources and integrate arts and culture across all facets of government planning and decision making. The Plan represents itself to be part of an integrated, place-based approach in building a vision and strategy to realize the value and potential of local cultural assets, and promises to build on partnerships and align resources linking the City with its community partners.

Point No. 5: Recent HMAAC Community Partnerships Suggest a Way to Insure Deficits Acknowledged in the City Cultural Plan are Mitigated if Not Resolved

Probably one of HMAAC's biggest achievements during 2016 has been its taking cultural vibrance to underserved communities through funding of collaborations with smaller African American cultural organizations and through use of various African American venues across the city. The organizations include the Urban Souls Dance Company, the Community Artists Collective, Robo I-Steam Camps, the Texas Center for African American Living History, the Nigerian American Multicultural Center, and the Roundtable Convo. The venues across the city include Brentwood Baptist Church, the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum, the Shrine of the Black Madonna, St. James Episcopal Church with upcoming events being planned for The

Church Without Walls and the University of Houston Clear Lake. These collaborations have resulted in dance, music, arts education, theater and civic engagement programming occurring in African American communities where participants in the City Plan asked for such programs to be held. Our mural program with artist Reginald Adams began in August of this year at the Johnson Funeral Home in the Third Ward and continues with a mural at Wheatley High School as part of its 90th Anniversary celebration, with future sites to be identified in Acres Home and Sunnyside. These collaborations have produced more than artist painted utility meters and mail boxes, which while decorative and supportive of artists, have minimal impact on community residents requests for meaningful and substantial art and culture in their neighborhoods. Our actions have allowed HMAAC, without fanfare, to do what others, and the City's Cultural Plan, talk about - extend culture into underserved areas. **But there is more that can be accomplished, and especially if, per the City Plan, it acts on its promise "to build on partnerships and align resources linking the City with its community partners."**

Conclusion:

It is clear that African American cultural assets are underfunded and it is acknowledged that our communities remain severely underserved, especially in terms of the manifestation of art and culture in the communities themselves. African American neighborhoods are standing at a crossroads of location and place: On one side stands intergenerational poverty, and on the other, the transformative value of cultural assets. **There is still time for an intervening intersection in the future.** For that to happen, our leaders must fight doggedly not just for our schools and post offices, but also for our cultural institutions. Embracing, supporting and building upon the HMAAC collaborations that take culture into our communities is a good start. But that will mean **providing public funds to either HMAAC and/or to our community cultural partners.** The long road for the Sunnysides of the city to become high opportunity neighborhoods begins not only with resolving food deserts and improved public services but with the provision of cultural assets as well, something HMAAC has proven can be done with minimal funds. If our cultural assets fail to gain greater community support and continue to crumble, the poverty of our neighborhoods will surely stay the same.

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