

Home Is Where the Art Is

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, April 13, 2005

“Growing up on a poor sharecropping farm in the rural South, we were as far from art as you can get,” Rick Lowe recalls of his childhood. One of 12 children, the charismatic, tall, fit African American was born in 1961 and raised in impoverished Russell County, Alabama. He remembers the front yard of his house—brown, with no grass. “There were these designs we used to rake into the dirt. We didn’t have art in the traditional sense, on the walls, but we found ways to create art all around us.”

An appreciation for art in everyday life is at the core of Project Row Houses, the community-based organization Rick founded in 1992. In some ways, it’s traditional, welcoming resident artists from around the world and fostering art installations that rotate every six months. But there’s more. He established Project Row Houses on a site as drab as the sharecropping farm of his youth—Houston’s Third Ward, a beleaguered, mostly black neighborhood in the city’s southeastern corner.

Project Row Houses began as an effort to save 22 abandoned but historically significant “shotgun” houses, so-called because one could theoretically fire a shotgun through the front door and the bullet would go straight through the back door. These houses, based on traditional African architecture, were brought to the United States by freed Haitian slaves in the 1800s and became symbols of freedom for African-Americans.

When Rick discovered the houses in the early ‘90s, they were in such disrepair that the city of Houston had placed them on the “dangerous buildings” list. In 1993, the CEO of a large corporation anonymously loaned Project Row Houses \$100,000 to buy the properties. Other corporations soon signed on. With volunteers working long hours scraping paint, repairing broken windows, and mowing down weeds, the first row house renovation was completed later that year. Rick’s vision was to transform these houses into a resource for the community and an unlikely place for public art—in the middle of a residential neighborhood.

At first glance, the row houses are unremarkable—identical, tidy, white one-storied clapboards with small porches and neatly trimmed hedges. A closer look reveals signs of the artists busy at work inside—bursting out onto the walls are inspiring pieces like the bright geometries of Esther Mahlunga.

Mahlunga, from South Africa, is one of the resident artists now at Project Row Houses. Rick speaks of the inspiration this tribal artist has brought to the community. “People had never really seen someone from a traditional African village.” In her brightly colored beaded and metal necklaces, armbands, and leg bands, Mahlunga turns heads as she walks down the streets of Houston.

“They were really taken by her. The neighbors might see a villager on television but miss the vibrancy of that person’s life. Our residents have learned from Mahlunga how her people think about spaces for living and working.” They’ve come to appreciate the ornate, geometric, and vibrant paintings typical of her people. “It made our community members think about their own homes differently.”

Youth in Houston’s Third Ward have been vital to this transformation. They’ve renovated some of the 25 additional buildings Project Row Houses has acquired since 1993. Teens are currently working on a local park just a mile from the organization’s main site, where they’re creating their own sculpture garden.

For Rick, art is not only about painting or sculpting, dancing or making music. It’s about having artful experiences and living in an artful environment—as Mahlunga’s people do. These conditions alone can be rehabilitating, and Project Row Houses is revitalizing Houston’s southeast corner. Others agree. The National Endowment for the Arts considers it a model program. With such a ringing endorsement, Rick Lowe’s vision may well inspire a new breed of artistic entrepreneurs in cities around the country.

The 20th century German artist Joseph Beuys emphasized that “everyone is an artist.” Beuys didn’t mean that all people should be creators of traditional artworks. Rather, he wanted everyone to think imaginatively, like artists do, and apply creativity to whatever they choose to do in life—whether business, farming, academics, homemaking, or neighborhood development. As Rick Lowe puts it, “Art is about finding the excellence in experience.” Our daily lives—no matter how mundane they may seem—are full of artistic inspiration waiting to be discovered. We need only open our eyes to be transformed.