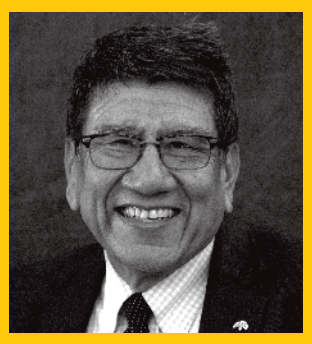
IS THIS A HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT?

A Creative Placemaking Conversation
Conducted by Jamie Bennett
Transcribed and adapted by Margy Waller

Jamie Bennett
I am Executive Director of ArtPlace America, a ten-year collaboration among a number of foundations, federal agencies, and financial institutions. We began our work as an organization in 2011, and will finish in 2020. Our mission is to position arts and culture as a core sector of community planning and development.



Roberto Bedoya
My business card says Cultural Affairs Manager, City of Oakland. I manage the Cultural Arts Division for the city. A lot of what I do is ask questions. It's all about the support structure for individual artists and how artists work in communities and the power of locale. And the poetic will of a city. It can be reduced to empowering talent and empowering communities.

Sixto Wagan
I am Director for the Center of Art and Social Engagement at the Catherine G. McGovern College for the Arts at the University of Houston. I come to this work as a former artist, as a curator, and nonprofit leader. I look at how a local community like Houston fits into a regional and national conversation.

Juanita Hardy
My business card says that I am Senior Visiting Fellow for Creative Placemaking for Urban Land Institute (ULI), a global nonprofit concerned with responsible landuse. It's a membership organization that provides research and programs to its members. I am part of a project funded by the Kresge Foundation that's exploring the use of art and culture on real estate development projects and the state of ULI today.

Judilee Reed
I was Program Director of the Thriving Cultures program at the Surdna Foundation. Our work focused on increasing the real and perceived value that artists create in their communities. We worked nationally. We applied a social justice lens to everything we did and within the arts program. And we had a very wide definition of artists that can include design shops, designers, and other kinds of cultural producers.

Maria Rosario Jackson
One business card is Arizona State University. My work is helping ensure that the next generation of urban planners, social workers, designers, and artists all understand the power of arts and culture and design in the building of healthy communities. The second business card I carry is with the Kresge Foundation as Senior Advisor, and I work primarily with the arts and culture team in strategy development.

As Executive Director of ArtPlace America, Jamie Bennett travels the length and breadth of the country, talking to a wide audience about the integration of arts culture in community and economic development. He organized and moderated a discussion with leaders in the field including Roberto Bedoya (Cultural Affairs Director for the City of Oakland), Maria Rosario Jackson (Kresge Foundation, and a professor at Arizona State University), Juanita Hardy (Urban Land Institute), Sixto Wagan (CASE, University of Houston), and Judilee Reed (Surdna Foundation). This conversation surveys the current state(s) of the practice(s) in arts-driven community development: who are some of the people doing this work, what are the words used to describe it and what do those connote, how do the values of equity and social justice intersect with the pressures of real estate and economic development?

As part of Artes Pa'lante, Aimee Tejada leads community zumba classes on the steps of Blessed Sacrament Church in Boston's Latin Quarter. Photo by Mark Saperstein, courtesy ArtPlace America.

Jamie: We're coming together as a group to talk about the intersection of arts and community, to talk about the intersection of the people and the built environment, to talk about the intersection of culture and the natural environment, and I think language and precedents are both important. When you think about this work, what is the language you use to describe it? How do you invite others into the work and what invitation do you use?

Maria: What is common with everyone is that the first step in getting people to understand this work is to make sure that they're taking an expansive notion of arts and culture. So I find myself, regardless of who I'm talking to, having to say something about who artists are, the broad range of folks that I think exist and work in really important ways under this umbrella, and bringing all those under the same tent, to get people to recognize that it's a bigger universe than they may have started thinking about—who artists are and what art, culture, and design actually comprises.

Then it's a question of figuring out what's the lowest hanging branch in order to establish a connection. If I'm speaking to people in the community development field, I'm meeting them where they are by recognizing that they likely have some interest in the idea of comprehensiveness. Being able to point out that comprehensiveness also includes consideration of the role of arts, culture, and design in healthy places is an opening for speaking with people in community development and planning fields.

With artists, there are many ways that artists pursue their careers and some artists are really interested in this kind of intersectional work and other artists aren't, and that's okay. But also, for many artists, who might not have done it before, the leap into contributing to communities is not a big one because it's part of what fuels their motivation in some cases.

Roberto: Oh, language keeps me up at night. Maria and many of you know that I just trip out on what we talk about a great deal, and I've generated some common narratives just to keep the frame open for actions, and actions may be policy, artwork. Whether it's placemaking or placekeeping, or whether it's belonging and disbelonging, in the context of this work, I've pushed those terms out.

I want to circle back to one of the challenges in my current position. I went to a meeting yesterday with my boss and they started teasing me about, "Oh, you're the policy, you're the language dude. Tell me what policy placekeeping means?" I just love problemitizing it. I don't have to come up with the answers necessarily ... here in this circle, I'd say that I love the fact that we're all puzzling this out.

I remember my conversations with Maria, about when I sit with the Department of Transportation, in city government, and the notion of placemaking comes up, it's very attached to paving the intersections. Some very materialistic action. While I would say, "You know what? An artist would think about routes, how people move through the city, routes of avoidance, how kids cut through this parking lot to get over there, 'cause they didn't want to deal with the dog, or they didn't want to wind up dealing with the crazy old man, or they don't want to deal with the homeless. An artist thinks about routes, which is different than what a city manager and a planner may think about.

Jamie: Juanita, you're working with real estate development. You're thinking about folks who, I don't think of as using words like counter-narrative, who don't necessarily know what's invoked by placekeeping. When you're talking about these intersections with folks who focus about how projects pencil out, what do you call this work? How do you sell it?

Juanita: In the ULI world, placemaking is something that is well known to the real estate development community. They've been doing placemaking dating back to the early, I want to say 1930s, when its value was demonstrated by one of ULI's founders, who created this mall, inspired by the great cities in Spain, and people flocked there for the experience and they still do today.

The way we discuss it is as an innovation in placemaking. It's about establishing a sense of place and doing it in a way that attracts people to the place, that generates interest, excitement that uplifts the place and the surrounding community.

We present the value proposition of doing this for the community, for the developer, and other stakeholders. We are engaged in a conversation around best practices and how we do this in a way that the developers benefit, the community benefits, you bring in new, exciting energy and money for the community that uplifts the community, but you do it responsibly so that you don't displace the people that are there.

Jamie: Sixto, when you think about this practice and how it plays out in arts communities and for artists, what is the language conversation, what is the work called, how do you invite people to this conversation?

Sixto: We do continue to use the language of creative placemaking, because this is actually the way it is, this is the dominant paradigm. We think about the ways you are actually going to be part of it. Or what ways are you going to be rolled over by it?

I think it is great to think about best practices and think about responsibilities in this work, but I think that too many times, particularly in Houston, it's presented as a very quick fix. There

are the quick projects that seemed really great, and then months later someone asks about results. We have a lot of history about not only the good ideas, but also unfortunately, some bad models have happened. That history gets in the way when we use the language of creative placemaking.

Jamie: Judilee, as you think about these language issues playing out, these words playing out in philanthropy, does the language matter, does it change how you as a foundation professional engage?

Judilee: When we do our work, we start with the language that comes from the community. We ask them to tell us what they're up to, what they're trying to do, what problems they're trying to solve, and how they're trying to solve it. Then we work back from there. If we're successful, the value proposition actually creates dividends across a number of dimensions.

That is somewhat different than, for example, the reasons why we would participate in an initiative like ArtPlace which is very much driven by creating a specific set of activities that are described under an umbrella of creative placemaking. These approaches are central to this objective of trying to unlock the imagination of non-arts operators at a community level in thinking about the dynamics or the intersections of artists and cultural production in relationship to their goals.

So it operates both in terms of how you can inspire the imagination of folks who may not already be working with artists and cultural producers as well as looking at how the cultural producers and artists themselves describe their practices.

Is This a Property Rights Movement or a Human Rights Movement?

Judilee: When Roberto talks about trying to problematize, I always feel like in the back of his mind, he's both trying to bring forth the voice of the critic while also trying to make way for those who don't see themselves within those frames and inviting the opportunity for them to describe what it is they do. I feel like if we're doing our job as a philanthropy, we also invite the same discussion.

Jamie: Roberto, before I move on to the next question, is Judilee, right? Is that what you're trying to do?

Roberto: On a good day. You gave me an opportunity to problematize, so I'm going to do it right now. What I have discovered here in my community—and Maria Jackson and I have talked about this a lot—is whether creative placemaking is a property rights movement or a human rights movement.

When I talk to developers, they're not articulating creative placemaking as a human rights movement, and maybe public housing advocates are, and that's a different sort of narrative.

In this particular moment in time, when development is happening—the community, whether it's the artist community, neighborhood, or refugee community, they see placemaking as displacement.

Who Has an Equity Approach to Arts and Community Work?

Jamie: I want to make sure that we spend a little time on gentrification. Talk about displacement. Questions about who decides, who pays, who benefits.

Before we go to there, I'd love for us to think about real world places where folks are getting this right, where projects begin with human beings, where they begin with the residents of a community, where there really is an equitable value proposition and equitable decision-making.

Juanita: One project that comes to mind is called Monroe Street Market. It is in Washington D.C. in the Brookland community. This 250-million-dollar mixed-use, transit-oriented development project has 27 artist studios on the ground floor of two of the buildings. There's an art walk. There's a community art center. There is a stage. There are athletic facilities. There is a lot of public space, walking paths, and bike paths, that surround this community.

Two developers, Bozzuto Group, a large local developer, and Abdo, a smaller developer that had the idea for this project, decided, instead of putting retail on these ground floors-of two of the buildings, they would put these 27 artist studios. The studios are affordable and the developer has stated this will be in perpetuity, meaning they will always be affordable. They will never get pushed out. They are in this community to stay.

Maria: A project that I really admire, and there are many, but one that comes to mind right this moment, is the Chinatown Community Development Center in San Francisco. I think for me it's such a poignant example because it's an example of both placemaking and placekeeping. Chinatown has immense pressures in San Francisco, given the real estate market there. There's a deep commitment for Chinatown not to be erased. At the same time there's recognition that this is a living community and that healthy places evolve.

Their strategy is rooted in understanding the importance of control over narrative of place, recognition that a way of keeping narrative is also manifest in built environment. So, how a place looks, reads, feels is part of your narrative, your cultural narrative.

In San Francisco, one of the things I was really impressed with as part of the Kresge support to this organization, is the learning and evaluation work. We were asking practitioners from many organizations about how they go about learning. I was struck by one of the Chinatown staff representatives who talked about how the executive director leads and encourages walking through the neighborhood. There's something about having that kind of a skin in the game and that kind of daily awareness of this place, not just this physical place, but this historic place and this evolving place, that seemed really rich and important to me.

The other thing that has really impressed me is the tactics that they use to enliven community engagement and how in some ways there's a seamlessness between artistic and creative practice and civic practice. To participate and engage in arts culture, the creation of how a community looks and feels, is part of your civic responsibility.

Jamie: Judilee, you also get to look nationally, but you don't just look at cities. So, when you were thinking about places in this country that don't necessarily look like Washington, DC or San Fran-

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cisco, are you seeing anything that you would love to hold up and say, "This is the kind of thing we want to see more of?"

Judilee: Yeah, definitely. Thanks for inviting the question around the non-urban approach to this work, because I think it's there where the lack of density can become central to how you address opportunities in these places. And when you asked the question, Jamie, the first project that came to my mind was one that the First People's Fund has just completed called Rolling Rez Arts, which is very much a response to both the geographic constraints of living and working on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, as well as the real needs for cultural producers to have access to resources in spite of that geographic challenge.

So, what the First People's Fund has done, in partnership with a number of folks including the Lakota Federal Credit Union and ArtSpace, is customize a van that could go to artists wherever they are across the Indian reservation and deliver art, business training, banking services, and a number of other network and information developing strategies.

First People's Fund found through their research that over 50 percent of the households on Pine Ridge have home-based businesses and of that 51 percent, almost 80 percent are creating art. So they have an artistic practice and they describe that practice as a business—it's a very high number. The challenge is that over half of them have incomes of less than $10,000.

What draws me to this example is that the problem solving is coming from the folks who understand it firsthand, the people who have been working in this community, or are of this community. They are perhaps best situated for figuring out, not only what the most meaningful artistic practice would be to bring through this bus portal, as well as how to work with local banks and figure out how to create banking services on a van. I mean, it's very compelling.

Jamie: Sixto, you're the home team. Tell us, are we getting it right in Houston? Is there something happening in Houston that we should hold up as a national example?

Sixto: Well, we've held Project Row Houses as an international example for many years. It has been a pioneer in this work, and also such an advocate, not only for the community, but also for artists who are able to do this work. Regarding the university's partnership with Row Houses, we want to know how to look at the process that they created, this collaborative and community-based process, and ask whether it is replicable. Or is it very much a Houston-based situation that's depends on Rick Lowe and that community of artist founders? It is a significant example of placekeeping that has been parlayed into civic outcomes.

I'm very interested in their current work in terms of the Emancipation Economic Development Council, and that Project Row Houses as a non-profit arts organization is key to bringing the religious communities and the businesses together in this artist-led equitable neighborhood community development endeavor to preserve community without gentrification.

Human Rights and the Dramaturgy of Public Policy

Jamie: Let's dive in there for a minute. There's a guy that I think many of us know named Andy Shallal who ran for mayor of Washington DC and he's a poet who's also a small business owner; he owns and runs the restaurant and bookstore Busboys and Poets. One of the things he talked about having learned in running for mayor is that White folks live in neighborhoods and Black folks live in communities. This makes me think about the difference between the people-first approach and a built-environment-first approach. Roberto, this seems like what you're getting at in terms of your human rights and property rights formulation. But talk about the difference. Who do you see starting with the people-first approach? Who are the kinds of people that you see originating projects and thinking in that way?

Roberto: I think that my preoccupation or reflections about placemaking as a human rights movement is also linked to the storytelling I was talking about: creating the platform for civic engagement work.

Oakland does not lack in civic self-esteem. I got a community that's always walking around with a clenched fist and they're just up in my face, God bless them all. And I love them. At the same time, we recognize the skillset needed to move zoning laws after Ghost Ship, that tragedy just generated so much civic chaos around zoning and spatial relationships. That is still a hot button issue. So for me, thinking about artist communities and thinking about east Oakland, how they are organizing themselves, it's really about trying to create agency and developing that skillset so that they feel empowered.

Now that I'm in government, I like to think about the dramaturgy of public policy and how artists come to understand how law is made or policy constructed and what's in their toolbox. If you think about dramaturgy in terms of space, stage, script, policy, actors, that's tools that they often

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Oakland Avenue Farm in Detroit, Michigan. Photo by Michelle and Chris Gerard.

have. So when my community organizing group just gets really frustrated and wants to change how things are moving, I often have to say, "Let's step back and look what's in your toolbox. You're a performing artist, you know about stages."

Jamie: Juanita, I'm particularly interested in real estate developers, because they're maybe one of the few businesses that can't pick up its assets and go somewhere else. If you own buildings, if you own land, you can't offshore that. You can't move all your buildings to another town that gives you a better tax break or something else. So real estate developers, the ULI community, are deeply invested in their places, or deeply invested in their communities, and yet also have this very specific profit mandate. So how do you see folks balancing the profit imperative and the commitment to place?

Juanita: It's a good question. What I have seen in the short one year that I've been at ULI is a great deal of interest on the part of developers, ULI members, to understand how to do this and do this well, and do this profitably.

The one thing that comes to mind right now is Walter Reed, which is a hospital complex in the northwest part of DC with a team of developers, Urban Atlantic Hines, and Triden, creating a mixed-use development project in the historic property. They decided that they were going to have art and culture be a major feature of this project. They decided to honor the history of this place as a federal medical facility and also bring things to the community that will help uplift the community.

They tapped two non-profits to help them in that. At the southern tip of this development will be an art complex that will include art studios and an incubator space for artists. There'll be artistic way-finding that connects this piece to the other parts of the complex. So they recognized that one important way to honor the history of a place, as well as to support their goals around placemaking and placekeeping, is to engage art and culture, to use art and culture to do that.

What About Gentrification? Where Do Artists Fit?

Jamie: That gets at it exactly. Let's spend some time now on the issues around gentrification, around displacement, around self-determination, around collective efficacy. And Sixto, I might start with you, because one of the things that's fascinating to me as I travel around the country and talk to people about these issues, is that artists are talked about as both gentrifiers and gentrified. Tell us how you've seen this play out.

Sixto: Part of the question is in how the artists are actually thinking of themselves as part of a larger narrative, and if they're only thinking of themselves very specifically in terms of arts production and that creation, versus actually being part of a community.

It is a question of where they are deployed in this process. In what ways have the developers or the community organizers actually established the purpose before artists were at the table? Have they taken their own civic responsibility to be part of those conversations earlier on? Or, in what ways, can they actually disrupt any of these processes so that it becomes a more equitable conversation and so that it's not just about making it all pretty, but actually about these larger questions of equity and a livable community.

Roberto: The disaster of Ghost Ship was a real interesting pivot in the civic life of this city. All of a sudden I found myself going to City Council meetings, zoning meetings, Planning Department meetings. The artist community's there with homeless activists and the refugee community and basically in a unified manner saying, "There's an underground housing market here that you're not dealing with. People are living in garages. People are living in warehouse spaces. People are living in tents. So this collective problem needs to be solved collectively."

Jamie: Judilee, at Surdna, you guys have identified sustainable environments, strong local economies and thriving cultures. You haven't talked about government. You haven't talked about policy.

Judilee: One of the things we're really challenged by in this moment is trying to make peace with whether we're trying to effect incremental change or if we're calling for a revolution.

If you look at a community level where systems are just simply not working, nor have they ever worked for certain populations, is our best chance of success one where we try to implement incremental changes where we're actually bending existing systems so that they work better in support of people?

Or should we be emboldening people to call for that revolution? To call for that kind of tectonic change that's going to reconceive this whole system so that the issue is not just about displacement, it's about the whole thing.

I do know that if I look at our funding portfolio across all three of our programs areas, you see a little bit of both.

So really specifically to some of the things Roberto was talking about, we are supporting an organization that is trying to leverage investment dollars to create a trust model in support of arts and cultural organizations in San Francisco and Oakland. How you can hold property as an asset in perpetuity in support of arts organizations? That's not a revolution. That's really just incremental change that we hope is going to begin to demonstrate or provide the runway to demonstrate all of the other ripple effects of having arts organizations in your community and the benefits that they provide.

Roberto: I did want to talk briefly about the impact of the Community Art Stabilization Trust (CAST) in the Bay Area. This is foundations, real estate developers, community and cultural community, cultural development trying to deal with stabilizing our non-profit sector. They've started off in San Francisco. Now they're working in Oakland. It's small, relatively small money. But they're having a great deal of impact keeping arts and artists in place. And it goes to say Judilee's point about trying to bend ever so slightly that kind of outcome for arts.

Juanita: Creative placemaking, as great as it is, and the many benefits it has provided to communities, that it has had the unintended outcome of gentrification on occasion in my view is not bad. It's not a bad thing. Bringing in new culture, new ideas, new energy that's what we want, right? When we're talking about revitalizing the community we want to bring in all this new good stuff. But we also want to honor and protect what's there, right? And promote what's there.

We don't want to see displacement. How do we avoid displacement? We think about putting plans in place, putting policies in place, collaborating with different partners to ensure that the people that, for example, the people that are there continue to be there. That we're diligent around placekeeping. That we don't drastically change the culture of a place. But we enrich that culture, we think about ways to uplift and enrich and enliven the culture that is there.

Jamie: Maria—Professor Jackson, if you're thinking about these issues of arts, culture and equitable development, gentrification and displacement and you're thinking about what your ASU students need to know about these things, what are the core concepts?

Maria: A first thing is a good grasp of what the issue is with a historical perspective.

The arts and culture stuff is just a piece of it. It tends to be, sometimes, a distraction, I think. Because it can make for an all-consuming story that is quotable and


Michigan Urban Farming Initiative

interesting, but it's a lot more complicated than I think is often made visible. Figuring out how to calibrate those public conversations about the role of arts, culture and design in neighborhood change, period, is something we're still not that good at it.

Is Gentrification the Right Word, or is it Displacement?

Jaime: The words "gentrification" and "displacement" are used interchangeably by some, and for others it is possible to have gentrification without displacement.

Roberto: I hate the term gentrification. It has currency and the press will always run with it.

Years ago when I was in Baltimore, I had a talk about gentrification and this was like a really tired conversation. I said to the audience, 'How many have heard the word rasquachification?' Nobody, nobody had heard it. I'm really concerned more about how vernacular forms of speech happen in neighborhoods and how we validate them. Rasquache is a slang term that talks about how you paint your house bright pink and how you turn your front yard into a little place where you're selling brooms. These are all vernacular forms of speech and these are all vernacular points of neighborhoods and somehow we do nothing to validate these forms of how arts, culture, and design animate city life. There may not be the big box or the remodelized train station. There are these other things. I guess what I'm sort of saying that part of my work is to constantly think about how do we validate what's already got juice.

One last thing. The placekeeping term. Even though I love it, it becomes a form of sentimentality. I go to a black arts cultural district and everybody's basically, saying, 'It's placekeeping.' But it's like they want the old days. They've got all this sentimentality and they've got Black Panther rhetoric behind it as well. Oakland's black population has decreased by 40 percent over the last decade. That's the trauma I'm dealing with in a city that's no longer a black city. So placekeeping becomes a tool, rhetoric to say, 'Hey I'm still alive.' You've got to applaud that but at the same time you all, come on. How do we pivot this to the action world of maintaining city identity?

Juanita: I agree that displacement is a huge issue. Something that we've been talking a lot about the last several months at ULI, and while we may not have a solution for it yet, and there may not be tools that exist yet as to how to address it that we can arm with community leaders and developers and the like, I think the fact that we're having this conversation is a very important one.

Roberto, you have a lot of passion, I hear that. I don't know how you feel about my comment that gentrification—don't think it's a bad word. I think when you talk about revitalizing a community, I think gentrification is exactly what you want, you want to bring in new energy, new people, new whatever to the community. You want to mix it up; you want to make it rich. You don't want to make it an all Chinese community, an all black community. We are a melting pot. You want to bring all of us together in a respectful way. That's why thinking about how to avoid displacement is, I think, where we need to focus our energy.

Roberto: I don't oppose the outcome of wanting a more robust civic life. I do hate the term gentrification. There's no way... If you don't cop to racism and displacement legacy that's built into the meaning of that world, then you're complicit. I want new words and I'm always about new words. Because if gentrification means othering, then it's not a good term.

I dig what you're saying, that at the best part of gentrification you have infrastructure. You have economic vitality. You have social curation. Those are all good things. But I cannot honestly say that I'm going to be a cheerleader for gentrification. I'd be killed in my town.

Maria: When we talk about mitigating "gentrification" or more precisely, loss of affordability and involuntary displacement of long term residents and businesses, I think we need to rethink our aspiration. Too often, the focus is only on preserving affordability. The aspiration can't just be limited to, "you will not be displaced." We can't be satisfied with that. In many communities that are vulnerable, the conditions are the result of historical exclusion from the mainstream socio-economic opportunity structure. We can't be satisfied with just protecting the results of a flawed system and the status quo. We need to aim for, not only protecting affordability, but also for creating opportunity for long standing residents and business owners to build wealth and advance beyond current circumstances. We have to set the bar higher. We are part of the problem if we don't.

Judilee: Yes, I really agree with what Maria is saying, but before she took me to a higher place, I was wrestling with the conversation that Juanita and Roberto were having. One of the key words that Juanita offered was respect. I would say that we have to think about proactive respect, not just a sort of passive, "I respect you. You also exist in this space." I think about the communities where there is change already happening, where there's change that was well programmed by city governments to create diversity of residents and what that means for folks who have been in those communities for generations. They have sent their kids to the community school, they have ... Really, this has been their neighborhood.

While I think that change should be welcomed, I also recognize the enormous challenges of that when we don't recognize the right of everyone to have a sense of belonging and a sense of place. It doesn't always have to be the same definition, right? It doesn't always have to be the same thing and when we forget that, it becomes really this tension of, kind of ... the dominant culture, if you will, over that which is perceived as being weaker.

Sixto: What is the value of homogeneity in a community? Or in a neighborhood? Part of the thing that we're struggling with or that I've been looking at is Houston's segregation and continued segregation in the historic wards and really what does that mean? In what ways have the traditional homogeneity in the wards been a benefit and a method of placekeeping? Because we can see the African-American and Latino communities still have a hard-fought presence in those historic neighborhoods. Whereas the Asian communities no longer have a significant presence inside the Loop, and they've been pushed to outlying suburbs.

Jamie: Projecting into the future, what's next for this conversation, for this community of us, and as part of that thinking, is there a new language? Is there a new way to talk about this work? Is there a new way to frame the conversation that open the door for more thinking?

So thinking forward a year, three years, 10 years, what is it that we need most that's in this conversation? What needs to change most?

Roberto: Maria, first of all, I love this phrase "opportunity structures." Is that a Professor Jackson original?

Maria: No. That's old school planning talk. That's old school planning, sociology, economics.

Roberto: Well, I love it, because in some ways in this current role, I think about creating for the future more robust opportunity structures, to be blunt. I'm doing a cultural plan. So I think about this road map that I've been given and the charge to create for my city.

"I go to a black arts cultural district and everybody's basically, saying, 'It's placekeeping.' But it's like they want the old days. They've got all this sentimentality and they've got Black Panther rhetoric behind it as well. Oakland's black population has decreased by 40 percent over the last decade. That's the trauma I'm dealing with in a city that's no longer a black city. So placekeeping becomes a tool, rhetoric to say, 'Hey I'm still alive.'"

As we speak I got an email from my mayor who basically's all like, "Oh, do you know about Bloomberg Philanthropies and their public art thing? And this project in Indiana. And this project in Albany." And I'm thinking like that's what I have to deal with. It's like I know that there's also this political pressure to kind of ... I hate to be so crass ... but produce bankable culture on the behalf of the city who wants that kind of feel good, community building, economic benefit, social cohesion that, God bless my mayor, she thinks that I can do all that. So do I.

She gets excited. But I think obviously I'm really struggling with language, because I think language is very important and I think as an artist-type, I think, how do we prompt the future? What does the artist do that sort of prompts our best selves to create the best social environment that we want. And I do think about equity, profoundly. And the charge to have a full, realized equal and just society.

So that's the work. My colleague here in city government, she's all about the built environment. She's the planner. I like to say, "She's space, I'm place." So I'm really about investing in the voice of a city, the aesthetic voice of the city. I believe profoundly that these artists have a poetic will that can change the world. They

Garage Cultural in Southwest Detroit and Oakland Avenue Urban Farm founders, Billy and Jerry Hebron. Photos courtesy ArtPlace.

do. They do it all the time. And so in some way the change that is occurring is also reimagining and animating civic life differently. And confronting those obstacles and those barriers. And it's messy, it's profoundly messy. It's the messiest thing I've ever done and I love it.

Juanita: I think the important point is, as Roberto said, and I think Maria alluded to also, is thinking high aspirations and beginning to change the conversation in a way that we can all buy into it and feel comfortable and all head singularly in a direction that moves all of us forward.

Maria: Related to that, I think that the paradigm about what we aspire to has to be tinkered with. It has to change. And the metrics and other systems that indicate whether we're making progress or not have to adapt to that elevated aspiration.

Judilee: Let me speak as a representative of a foundation for a moment. The task ahead for us specifically is occupying the space between metrics and metaphor. I hope that as we move forward with this work we begin to really task ourselves and the folks who we're working with to really look at where the benefits accrue as a result of the work that we're doing.

Hopefully it will be across a number of beneficiaries, not across a single goal. Oftentimes what we do is measured by a single goal. It's a metric-driven kind of system. I think that's to our detriment.

I was at a book reading a couple weeks ago by Arundhati Roy, the wonderful novelist and social-political activist. She has this background in architecture and was riffing a little bit about urban planning and what that means in her city of Delhi.

She talked about how we had to start considering cities as everything that is in the air, not just the buildings and the arrangements of streets. It was compelling to me in the simplicity of the expression, but also in how profound it is to really ask ourselves to arrange our work in such a way that we look at the intersections of all of these things, and we think about what success looks like across a number of dimensions, not just one.

Sixto: Well, I guess it's evident why all of these esteemed thinkers before me have actually influenced everything that I've done, so thank you for all of those really smart words. These are a lot of things that I've been thinking about, particularly ideas about metrics and who are they for. Will they be used in a positive way? What ways will they be used against artists and or communities? Who's able to be at the table around the development of those metrics?

I continue to think about Houston and where we are, and what Houston of five years is going to be. We will continue to be an energy capital, but really what does that look like when we continue to be growing and will be the third largest city? What are the implications of that? Who's actually moving into the city?

At this University, we will use this as a center and as a platform, actually encouraging other artists and other communities and other organizations order to engage in this discourse. Actually making sure that it is an ongoing conversation and that it is no longer just swept under the rug. As artists and arts organizations we will think about the next crisis. We want to think about the next citizens that we're building this city and these communities for.

Jamie: I have been looking at the words that kept popping up. They're these wonderful pairings of twin concept, of metrics and metaphor, voice and agency, of authenticity and nostalgia, of belonging and displacement, and of people and place.

What is a word, what is a phrase that you're walking away with? What is something that's echoing in your ear from this conversation?

Judilee: Roberto oftentimes provokes a lot in me. One of the things that I want to sit with a bit more coming out of this conversation is this idea of creative placemaking as a human right. I want to think about that across everything we do because in this particular moment in time, we really need to think critically about what human rights looks like in this country.

It's creative placemaking as a human right, but I'm also going to fill in other practices, other themes, as hyphenated human rights. Ask ourselves whether or not we are addressing it in that manner. Thank you, Roberto.

Maria: I'm thinking a lot about aligning aspiration with all of the things that we're doing. Whether it's metrics, whether it's training, whether it's public dialogue. There's something about this particularly in the conversation about gentrification.

In crisis, you can take a couple of different roads. You either shrink and retrench and hold on, or you open up and something else emerges. I think that we have to be inclined to let something else emerge. We've got to reckon with letting go of some of the things that we're comfortable with or have thought were the right things to do, and let something else emerge.

Jamie: Thank you, guys, for taking a couple hours. Thank you for thinking out loud. Thank you for engaging.