

## MAKE ART. BUILD COMMUNITY. CREATE CHANGE.

An Ethnographic Study of The Laundromat Project in  
Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn



### What is the issue?

Many communities of color in the U.S. have been plagued by years of redlining, gentrification, and a decline in industry and investment. Arts organizations rooted in these communities often provide spaces and other resources to combat these and other challenges. This brief is based on a study that illuminates how The Laundromat Project (The LP) builds community power in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood through sustained engagement with community members.

### What is the research context?

The Laundromat Project was founded in 2005 as a platform to bring art into everyday spaces—hosting public art projects and creative activities, fostering connections among neighbors, and using art as a catalyst for social change. In the 20 years since, The LP has launched its flagship annual residency program and a community-engaged artist fellowship, and deepened sustained programmatic focus in underserved communities across New York City. In 2020, The LP opened a community hub in Brooklyn's historically Black Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood.

### What are the research findings?

This study describes how The LP has, over the last two

### Research Approach

Boston's research is based on a year-long study beginning in July 2023. It includes participant observation, visual documentation, archival analyses, and one-on-one interviews and focus groups with local artists, neighbors, and community leaders. The aim is to help understand priorities, desires, and aspirations of people living in The Laundromat Project's hyper-local Bedford-Stuyvesant community.

decades, used the arts to deepen relationships among neighbors and provide new mediums for community members to address pressing social concerns. With an eye toward the arts organization's future, the study explores community members' perspectives about the role of the arts in building collective neighborhood power and how The LP can support the community in Bedford-Stuyvesant. An anchor neighborhood in one of the nation's largest contiguous Black communities, Bedford-Stuyvesant continues to undergo rapid gentrification that has displaced thousands of Black residents in the last decade.

Brief based on *Make Art. Build Community. Create Change: A Case Study of The Laundromat Project* by Amanda T. Boston, Ph.D.

The LP's flagship annual residency program, *Create Change*, launched in 2006. It has supported artists and creatives across mediums to develop participatory and community-based creative projects in neighborhoods across New York City. In its first decade, The LP expanded its offerings to community gathering spaces beyond neighborhood laundromats and completed a strategic plan for sustained programmatic focus in the historically Black and Latinx neighborhoods of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Harlem, and the Hunts Point/Longwood section of the Bronx. The organization collaborated with a local community improvement association and an affordable housing developer in the Bronx to transform an apartment into a community art space, with one bedroom dedicated to a yearlong residency for a community artist. In 2020, after holding a series of listening sessions in Bedford-Stuyvesant, The LP secured a storefront on the neighborhood's historic Fulton Street thoroughfare to serve as an anchor in the rapidly gentrifying community. Today, while The LP is active citywide, it operates with a hyper-local focus on sustained impact in Bedford-Stuyvesant through deep, community-responsive programming that uses arts and culture to strengthen social connections by bringing community members together for a wide range of events. The organization also helps cultivate local leaders through its programming and affirms what it calls "community power" by sharing resources with Bedford-Stuyvesant residents.

To better understand how it could continue to build community power, The LP and Boston asked local artists, neighbors, and community leaders to define what "power" meant to them. In response, community members stressed the importance of collaboration and resource sharing, a reverence for Black culture, and love between individuals and within families and communities. They affirmed that the arts play a vital role in building community power through organizing and storytelling that encourages people to explore complex social issues. They also said art was important for bridge-building among Black people of different ethnicities.

Community members called on The LP to further establish itself as a contemporary community anchor, ready to meet the needs of local constituents. They said that the location on Fulton Street is a critical resource in a community with rapidly rising rents and fewer Black-led spaces. They encouraged The LP to open the space for more community gatherings for a variety of purposes.

### Suggested Brief Citation

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## Why does this matter?

Arts organizations rooted in communities of color can be a key asset to their communities. They can help catalyze artmaking for social change, provide grassroots and creative leadership development, and serve as a knowledge and resource exchange. They may also become anchor institutions in communities undergoing profound residential, cultural, and political displacement.

Funders and supporters of these organizations might consider:

- Providing resources to support property acquisitions to expand community-engaged programming and provide long-term and permanent spaces for community gathering.
- Supporting arts organizations rooted in communities of color to deepen and expand programs focusing on art and storytelling to combat community cultural displacement and erasure.

This study was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the U.S. arts ecosystem. The views summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.