



## What is the issue?

Revitalization of space typically involves its physical transformation, but it may not attend to the cultures, histories, and communities that are displaced in the process. This study explores the multifaceted evolution of Rebuild Foundation in Chicago and the unique endeavors of its founder, Theaster Gates, to invest in an innovative and collective approach to placemaking and community and cultural preservation.

## What is the research context?

Founded in 2010, Rebuild Foundation supports artists and the well-being of communities by providing free arts programming, residencies, and cultural amenities on the South Side of Chicago. Rebuild has restored and currently operates several cultural sites on the South Side including the Stony Island Arts Bank, Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, Kenwood Gardens, and The Land School (formerly known as St. Laurence Elementary School). The organization aims to amplify the history, value, and promise of Black creativity.

## Research Approach

Over the course of a yearlong ethnographic study beginning in July 2022, researcher Nazanin Ghaffari employed qualitative ethnographic research methods including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and archival research to explore the history, culture, context, and evolution of Rebuild Foundation.

## What are the research findings?

Rebuild Foundation's work is driven by the principle that Black people, spaces, and artifacts matter. The organization incorporates art, urban planning, architecture, and entrepreneurship to create "place" as a powerful and communal vehicle for cultural affirmation, historical preservation, social activism, economic development, community regeneration, and Black excellence. The findings of Ghaffari's case study suggest that both

Brief based on *Make a Thing that Makes a Thing: Investigating an Artist-Led Initiative Celebrating Black Spaces, Black Objects, and Black Arts in South Side Chicago*, by Nazanin Ghaffari, Ph.D., of the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry

arts-making and placemaking strategies have been vital to the evolution of Rebuild's initiatives as the organization has evolved from a grassroots startup to a nationally and increasingly internationally recognized institution.

During its early years, Rebuild focused on revitalizing neglected spaces on Chicago's South Side to serve as platforms for cultural exchange, artistic expression, and community gatherings. Concurrently, the development of archives played a crucial role in the foundation's efforts to preserve and celebrate Black history and culture, transforming archives into vibrant public spaces where history continues to be made and experienced. Rebuild's acquisition of significant collections continues to inspire new artistic creations and scholarly research, bridging the gap between history and contemporary practice.

Rebuild supports artists through residencies, exhibitions, and performances, offering them space to collaborate and engage with one another. Finally, the concepts of hospitality, feasts, and communal gatherings are woven into the fabric of Rebuild's initiatives. These gatherings foster social cohesion, celebrate cultural heritage,

and provide opportunities for meaningful interactions among diverse community members.

Rebuild's case shows the potential of the arts to drive meaningful and lasting change in urban communities. Ghaffari argues that Rebuild's creative efforts are not merely acts of celebration or exhibition but deliberate acts of arts-making and placemaking, curated and safeguarded to emphasize Black excellence and ensure that the narratives and cultural contributions of African Americans are highlighted and honored. The work also demonstrates how archives and gatherings can anchor revitalization efforts that foster social cohesion and activism, support cultural resilience, and catalyze thoughtful economic development.

### Suggested Brief Citation

The Wallace Foundation. (2026). *Black Arts-making and Placemaking*. A research brief describing an ethnographic study of the Rebuild Foundation in Chicago by Nazanin Ghaffari. The Wallace Foundation, New York. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-AO5764.001>

## Why does this matter?

Funders and policymakers focused on community development and ethical placemaking should invest in artists and arts organizations as core drivers of community well-being and local economic growth. This includes directing resources toward initiatives that:

- Support integrated arts-making and placemaking strategies that merge artistic practice with urban planning, architecture, and community-driven revitalization.
- Allocate flexible, multi-year funding to allow artist-led and community-led processes to evolve at the speed of trust and respond to local needs.
- Promote preservation as an ongoing creative and civic responsibility through sustained operating and capital support for the acquisition, care, activation, and programming of community cultural assets.
- Center works that activate community archives through exhibitions, performances, research, and new commissions to connect historical preservation to current cultural practice.
- Incorporate expanded definitions of allowable costs and outcomes that include hospitality and convening as legitimate cultural infrastructure essential for community-building and civic participation.

The study this brief is based on 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 original research and findings summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.