

Press Release

Announcement

CAMH and HFTC Awarded Mellon Foundation Grant for Multi-Year Partnership



Photo of Charonda Johnson and Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy Executive Director Zion Escobar Leading Houston Texans on a Tour of Freedmen's Town. Image by Priscilla Graham.

HOUSTON, TX (January 18, 2023) — Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy (HFTC), the City of Houston (COH), and artist Theaster Gates announce their partnership to promote Houston Freedmen's Town as a monument of Black community, agency, and heritage through the multi-year *Rebirth in Action: Telling the Story of Freedom* initiative. The first phase of the project includes community engagement, artist-led activations through a continuation of CAMH's artist residency program CAMHLAB, an exhibition with renowned artist Theaster Gates, and infrastructure resiliency planning. The partnership has been awarded \$1,250,000 from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant through the Our Town initiative to support the initiative.

#RebirthinAction
#HoustonFreedmensTown
#atCAMH

Press Contact

For high-resolution images or
media inquiries, contact:

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Freedmen's Town, a neighborhood established in 1865 by over 1,000 formerly enslaved people, is now recognized as Houston's first Heritage District that includes seven sites recognized by UNESCO Routes of Enslaved Peoples project. HFTC's role is to "Tell the Story of Freedom" by protecting and preserving Freedmen's Town, and by educating and engaging visitors from around the world about the unique history of this largely untold chapter of Houston's and America's past.

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

5216 Montrose Boulevard
Houston, Texas 77006
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Foremost in this effort is the archaeological preservation of brick streets, first funded and laid by formerly enslaved residents, which hold deep historical and spiritual significance. In response to this context, the *Rebirth in Action* project will be community-driven and guided by a cross-disciplinary team encompassing engineers and preservationists alongside artist Theaster Gates, whose expansive multidisciplinary practice work demonstrates the connections between and spiritual possibilities of clay, bricks and Black labor.

“What we are doing with the *Rebirth In Action* project is reactivating the creative consciousness through the language of art and the liberation of trapped desires through the act of designing your destiny.” says HFTC Executive Director Zion Escobar. “The energy of this project and it’s activations serve to strengthen the present voices and descendants of Freedmen’s Town with the necessary fuel for the Rebirth. The community is invited to tap in and communicate their vision in a unified effort so that memories of what was informs the records of human history, instructing future generations in the collective work ahead of us. Stay tuned for more!”



Photo of the Historic Freedmen’s Town Bricks at the Intersection of Wilson Street and Andrews Street. Image by Priscilla Graham.

This comprehensive community engagement effort will be led by Partnership Engagement Manager, Charonda Johnson, a fifth generation Freedmen’s Town resident who has served the community for 20 years and is also Vice President of the Freedmen’s Town Association. Johnson’s deep connection to her community will inform art integration, infrastructure planning and preservation led by Partnership Project Manager, Mich Stevenson, an active Houston artist and community organizer. Freedmen’s Town community leaders, advocates, local and national press will be invited to the partnership Kickoff Celebration on Tuesday, February 14th at 10am to learn more about the partnership and meet the team.

Rebirth in Action is grounded in Freedmen’s Town community values that will guide planning for the infrastructure upgrades necessary to archaeologically renew its brick streets in the historic traditions of the community and the values of legacy residents. CAMH Executive Director Hesse McGraw says, “we are honored to work in collaboration with the Freedmen’s Town community, HFTC, the City, and Theaster Gates. We are grateful for the support of the Mellon Foundation and NEA and their recognition of the unique impacts our cross-sector partnership can realize in Freedmen’s Town. The *Rebirth in Action* project presents a long-needed opportunity for our city to honor its history, for artists to envision the future, and most importantly for the community to lead change.”

The *Rebirth in Action* exhibition, organized by Contemporary Arts

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Photo of Chardona Johnson leading a Tour of Freedmen's Town for Awty International Students. Image by Priscilla Graham.

Museum Houston and Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy, expands the notion of a monument to include the living community represented by legacy residents of Houston Freedmen's Town. In the Freedmen's Town community, legacy residents provide the cornerstone of a historic lineage to emancipation and its founding freed Black community. As a container of these histories, each legacy member embodies a facet of Houston Freedmen's Town. Within this rich context, the exhibition will center equitable collaboration and engagement, to create resource-generating opportunities for the legacy residents even as long-standing infrastructure and cultural heritage investments are being made in their community.

In conjunction with the feasibility plan, artistic activations by local and national artists—including an exhibition by Theaster Gates, and an exhibition highlighting innovative Black artists of Houston—will seek to ignite public imagination around the rich stories embedded within Freedmen's Town. The *Rebirth in Action* exhibition will honor and support legacy residents while preserving and archiving their histories—ingrained within the historic brick streets—as a living memorial in Freedmen's Town.



Photo of Dorris Ellis Robinson laying on the Brick Streets in Protest in Freedmen's Town. Image by Priscilla Graham.

Throughout his career, Theaster Gates has commanded and reoriented our understanding of Black labor, materiality, and place. His work offers a poignant lens through which we are asked to consider the true power of Black spaces, which, although historically underappreciated and under-resourced, hold deep resonance as sites of resilience, restitution, and redemption. The *Rebirth in Action* exhibition will commence with a series of town hall and community stakeholder meetings to identify the immediate needs and values of the legacy residents. This effort, which connects deeply to Gates' artistic investments and explorations throughout his practice, seeks to make explicit the connections between material, labor, community, and spirituality.

“The *Rebirth in Action* project is an example of how social innovation in Black communities develops out of precarity and how a museum can work hand-in-hand with community partners to engage in restorative justice and develop deeper community engagement through the lens of art, healing, and community investment,” says CAMH Deputy Director Seba R. Suber. “The historical and spiritual legacy of Houston's Freedmen's Town recontextualizes and amplifies the resiliency of Black communities and its descendants.”

The project will create new opportunities for local artists and research fellows that will be selected through an open call.

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Photo of Freedmen's Town Founder Jack Yates Homestead. Image by Priscilla Graham.

CAMH Mission

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston presents extraordinary, thought-provoking arts programming and exhibitions to educate and inspire audiences nationally and internationally.

General Information

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is located at 5216 Montrose Boulevard, in the heart of Houston's Museum District.

Hours

Wed	11AM-6PM
Thu	11AM-9PM
Fri	11AM-6PM
Sat	11AM-6PM
Sun	11AM-6PM

Admission is always free. For more information, visit CAMH.ORG or call 713.284.8250.

CAMHLAB artists-in-residence at Freedmen's Town will be curated for projects that highlight, honor, and animate the histories and stories of Freedmen's Town. Each residency will culminate in a public presentation of a project within Freedmen's Town.

In line with HFTC's goals, research fellows will generate new research that connects artists and the general public to the legacies of Freedmen's Town. They will act as research guides for artistic activations and the CAMHLAB artists-in-residence, connecting each artist to the resources they need to create their work.

The Houston Public Library Director, Dr. Rhea Brown Lawson, is "proud to partner with HFTC in the shared goals of protecting, preserving, and amplifying the rich history of African Americans in the region utilizing our shared resources right here in the Freedmen's Town Heritage District to engage the public."

"Houston Public Works (HPW) is proud to partner with HFTC and CAMH through this project," says HPW Director Carol Haddock. "By creating a schematic feasibility plan with Concept Engineers, Inc., we can ensure future developments are respectful and complementary to Freedmen's Town heritage. We will be able to preserve its history, while enhancing the area for a more resilient future."

About Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) presents extraordinary, thought-provoking arts programming and exhibitions to educate and inspire audiences nationally and internationally. Established in 1948, CAMH is one of the oldest non-collecting contemporary art museums in the country, and is internationally known for presenting pivotal and landmark work by artists recognized as the most important of the 20th and 21st centuries. CAMH's mandate is to be present, to connect artists and audiences through the urgent issues of our time, and to adventurously promote the catalytic possibilities of contemporary art. CAMH's programming, both in and beyond the Museum, is presented free to the public, and advocates for artists' essential role in society.

About Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy

The Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that protects and preserves the history of Freedmen's Town for the benefit of future generations. The conservancy supports community engagement, re-education, and heritage tourism while preserving the historic legacy of Freedmen's Town, inspiring all through education and awareness of its unique story.