

April 21, 2014

Vice Chancellor and Provost Eric Spina  
Syracuse University  
900 S. Crouse Avenue  
Crouse-Hinds Hall, Suite 600  
Syracuse, New York 13244-1100

Dear Vice Chancellor and Provost Spina:

I write in support of the remarkable 601 Tully project that Marion Wilson, with many Syracuse students, has guided for the past four years. It is an example of progressive and enlightened collaboration between a major university and the city that it supports and also depends on.

The following passage from my essay "Socially Engaged Art" (*Artists Reclaim the Commons*. Editors Glenn Harper and Twylene Moyer. ISC Press: Hamilton, NY, 2013) describes 601 Tully Street in its vibrant context.

*Rick Lowe's deservedly renowned Project Row Houses (1993–ongoing) emerged out of the despair of economic fallout and dramatic abandonment of a historically black district in Houston. As an independent artist living in Houston, Lowe affiliated with a community center that was inventorying the scope of deterioration in the neighborhood, including twenty-two abandoned historic "shotgun" style houses. While common sense confirmed that these derelict buildings had declined to an intolerable level of urban blight, Lowe (inspired by his study of Joseph Beuys and John Biggers) saw opportunity in the forfeited and neglected site. With grants and other support he purchased the houses and, with students from the School of Architecture at Rice University and eventually other residents of the city, began to rehabilitate and develop social and cultural programs for the small structures. Some were designated as transitional homes for single mothers who sought to become independent and self-sufficient through education and support programs; other houses provided artists' and writers' residencies and sites for temporary installations and interventions. Almost 20 years later, the reconstituted houses have served as a vibrant catalyst and strategic summons for community and city revitalization, individual and institutional renewal within an environment of competing visions of economic development.*

*Over time, many stakeholders have become involved and Lowe's role has evolved from an artist who physically transformed the physical detritus of a dying neighborhood into an inhabited and living community, to a strategic planner, cultural collaborator, and skillful negotiator who works within different sectors of citizens, community leaders, and city officials to advance an agenda of affordable housing and redevelopment that resists the voracious and opportunistic forces of gentrification. Project Row Houses remains a radiant example of persistence and practiced agility within changing social conditions and public spheres. To ensure its survival, mission, and progressive symbolism, it has had to exponentially expand its radius of engagement. This largely, if not solely, has been guided by Lowe's transformation as an artist whose practice has become inextricably defined by the dynamic social conditions of a neighborhood within the context of pernicious economic forces and factors.*

*A more recent project by artist Marion Wilson continues the legacy of Lowe's consequential work in Syracuse, New York. Smaller scope and scale, it offers a compact, adaptable, and replicable model of a socially engaged artist's intervention as a cultural probe for community revitalization.*

*In both cases, Lowe and Wilson have seized a stereotypic symbol of hopelessness and transformed this into an iconographic alternative of agency and potential. Wilson lives in Syracuse where she is a faculty member of Professional Art Practice and former Director of Community Initiatives at Syracuse University. In these roles, she has worked with students and community groups to transform an aged recreational vehicle into MLAB, a Mobile Literary Arts Bus, that serves as a peripatetic gallery, classroom, and learning lab for Syracuse public schools largely through after school art programs.*

*Her most recent project is 601 Tully Street (2009-ongoing). Located on the west end of the city, the neighborhood was designated the ninth poorest nationally in the last United States Census. In the past three years, with different groups of Syracuse students in her "Social Sculpture" courses together with members of the community, Wilson has guided the comprehensive rejuvenation of a former drug house into an active and sustainable community center. Current programs include nutrition programs for low-income adults in collaboration with a local grocery store, barrista certification programs for teenagers with a local coffee distributor, and a gallery for rotating exhibitions. At a recent visit to the site, Wilson described to me a fascinating process of working with supportive and skeptical neighbors, a city zoning board that presented countless hurdles, and both eager and less motivated high school and college students. All of the interior renovations (floors, walls, and furnishings) were created from beams harvested from abandoned warehouses (another prevailing sign of Syracuse's economic challenges and repurposed opportunities.) The space is filled with light, delightful ad hoc furnishings, books and art, and kitchen.*

*Wilson continues to hold most of her university classes at 601 Tully Street so that students can continue to work on the building and develop programming in collaboration with the local community. Wilson sees the building as an ongoing, perpetually unfinished, and constitutively vulnerable work of art and identifies "neighboring" as new dynamic form of sculpture. Through this work, she has become a skillful and resourceful orchestrator of individual and collective capacities, as well as the positive and productive co-equivalence of expert, local, and amateur knowledge.*

How paradoxical that artist Theaster Gates is being honored this week with a richly-deserved and prestigious Skowhegan award for his important work in Chicago (it also is notable that writer and critic Lucy Lippard who has been such a champion of this kind of relevant and generative work is receiving an award this year as well) -- and Marion's project in Syracuse has been de-funded.

Sincerely,

Patricia C. Phillips  
Dean of Graduate Studies + Research

cc: Interim Dean Joanna Masingila  
Dean Ann Clarke