



GREATER HOUSTON ARTS FORUM

2025 HIGHLIGHT REPORT

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I. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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List of Guest Speakers [Here](#)

THANK YOU TO OUR VENUE HOSTS

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The 2025 Greater Houston Arts Forum was hosted by HouArts, Houston Arts Alliance, the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, and Houston Endowment.

I. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About HouArts

HouArts is a region-wide initiative working to strengthen Houston's arts and culture sector through strategic advocacy, expanded partnerships, and unified messaging. Guided by artists and arts workers, this platform centers equity, sustainability, and community-driven impact. Learn more at www.houarts.org. Follow the HouArts on LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram.

About Houston Arts Alliance

Houston Arts Alliance (HAA) is a local arts and culture non-profit agency whose principal work is to implement the City of Houston's vision, values, and goals for its arts grantmaking and civic art investments. HAA's work is conducted through contracts with the City of Houston, overseen by the Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs. HAA also executes privately funded programs and projects to meet the needs of the arts community, such as disaster preparation and research on the state of the arts in Houston. In short, HAA helps artists and nonprofits be bold, productive, and strong. Visit <https://houstonartsalliance.com> for more information.

About Hobby Center for the Performing Arts

The Hobby Center for the Performing Arts serves as a connector, convener and incubator for all Houston audiences, artmakers and arts organizations. Opened in 2002, the campus houses two theaters and welcomes over 450,000 audience members annually to a wide range of arts experiences including the Memorial Hermann Broadway at the Hobby Center series.

The Hobby Center is also home to a full season of musical theatre produced by Principal Resident Company Theatre Under the Stars, as well as a variety of diverse performances from both Houston-based and touring artists and companies. Education and accessibility initiatives are central to the Hobby Center's impact in Houston through programs like the ExxonMobil Discovery Series, sensory inclusive performances, tactile tours, talkbacks, specialized audience services, and master classes for artists and students. The ExxonMobil Discovery Series creates access to engaging arts experiences for thousands of Houston-area students each year and are offered free of charge to schools. Please visit TheHobbyCenter.org. Follow the Hobby Center on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

About Houston Endowment

Houston Endowment is a private foundation established in 1937 by Jesse H. Jones and his wife, Mary Gibbs Jones, to improve the quality of life for everyone in Greater Houston. Today, it has more than \$2 billion in assets and invests about \$100 million a year in strengthening public education, increasing civic engagement, enhancing the arts and cultural sector, and growing Houston's greenspaces—as well as addressing emerging opportunities in our region. Working with fellow Houstonians, Houston Endowment pursues bold goals, builds partnerships, and invests in innovative solutions to create a vibrant region where all have the opportunity to thrive. Learn more at www.houstonendowment.org.

With additional support from Houston's Cultural Districts.

I. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About Houston's Cultural Districts

Houston's seven state-designated Cultural Districts — 5th Ward Cultural Arts District, Arts District Houston, East End Houston Cultural District, Midtown Cultural Arts and Entertainment District, Houston Museum District, Theater District Houston, and Third Ward Cultural District — collectively reflect the diverse neighborhoods and creative experiences that make Houston unique. Each district has its own distinct identity, purpose, and vision, yet all share a commitment to using the arts to educate, inspire, and enhance quality of life. Together, the Cultural Districts are championing and celebrating arts and culture for the Greater Houston region through the creation of collaborative initiatives such as HouArts. By working collectively, the districts not only strengthen their local communities but also attract investment, drive economic growth, and expand cultural engagement across Houston. Learn more at www.houstonculturaldistricts.com

A SPECIAL APPRECIATION TO OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS!

ALMAAHH Houston

Arts Connect Houston

Arte Publico Press

BIPOC Arts Network Fund

Dance Source Houston

Fresh Arts / Arts District Houston

Houston Cinema Arts Society

Islamic Arts Society

SWAMP: Southwest Alternate Media Project, Inc.

Theater District Houston

Thank you to Alton DuLaney, Chief Curator of Cultural Affairs for the City of Houston, for curating today's arts and entertainment, featuring performances from the Artist in Residence and Harmony in the Air programs at Houston airports.

Location

Hobby Center for the Performing Arts

800 Bagby St, Houston, TX 77002, USA



II. FOREWORD

On October 14, 2025, the first Greater Houston Arts Forum gathered **artists, cultural workers, nonprofit leaders, funders, educators, and policymakers** at the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts. Guided by the theme, “I am the arts. The arts are for all,” the day centered on learning, collaboration, and action. Together we explored how Houston’s cultural ecosystem operates, named the challenges that constrain it, and co-created practical pathways to advance equity, visibility, and sustainability.

Across plenaries, panels, and working sessions, one message rang clear: Houston’s arts sector is strongest when it moves with a shared vision and a shared voice. Participants connected data to advocacy, linked public funding to community outcomes, and elevated artist-centered strategies for creative careers, cultural storytelling, and vibrant public spaces. The Forum affirmed Houston’s identity as a dynamic cultural capital and catalyzed ongoing work to make that promise real for every neighborhood.

This Forum is intended to be an annual touchstone. It is a place to align around what works, learn what is changing, and commit to concrete steps. Thank you to everyone who showed up to teach, learn, and build together. We look forward to seeing you next October with deeper partnerships, stronger data, and more visible impact across the region.

I AM
THE ARTS.
THE ARTS
ARE FOR
ALL.

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Greater Houston Arts Forum brought together artists, cultural workers, nonprofit leaders, funders, educators, and policymakers to strengthen the region's creative ecosystem through shared learning and collaboration. The day-long event focused on six priorities: understanding the Greater Houston arts sector, using data to guide storytelling, creating vibrant public spaces, expanding economic opportunity for artists and arts workers, civic engagement, and protecting public investment in the arts.

Core Themes

- **Collaboration and shared vision:** Houston's creative community is strongest when institutions, artists, and funders align around common goals and unified advocacy. Collective action among artists, organizations, and funders builds trust, aligns goals, and amplifies impact across the region.
- **Data and storytelling:** Participants agreed that data and storytelling must work together, with credible data providing evidence of impact and authentic stories giving it meaning, allowing Houston's arts community to communicate its value, shape policy, and inspire broader public support.
- **Equity and access:** Across all sessions, the central theme was that true equity and inclusion in Houston's arts ecosystem require shifting from symbolic diversity to shared power, investment, and decision-making that authentically reflects and serves the city's full cultural diversity.

Key Insights from the Sessions

- **Arts data and policy:** Leaders advanced a citywide approach to data collection that connects cultural vibrancy, economic development, and community cohesion.
- **Vibrant spaces:** Artists called for better infrastructure, clearer permitting, and ongoing collaboration with city agencies to make creative public spaces more accessible.
- **Creative economy:** Presenters identified workforce development, leadership training, and business education as critical to sustaining artists' careers.
- **Cultural storytelling:** Participants began developing a shared narrative that celebrates Houston's diversity and positions the city as a cultural capital.
- **Civic engagement:** Speakers underscored the importance of consistent, informed participation in local and state elections to ensure the arts remain a civic priority.
- **Entrepreneurship:** Panelists emphasized balancing creativity with business practices such as goal setting, budgeting, marketing, and intellectual property protection.
- **Public Funding and Policy:** Discussions mapped current federal, state, and local funding streams for the arts and identified opportunities for new investment.

Outcomes

The Forum strengthened relationships across disciplines, institutions, and communities, reinforcing a shared commitment to building a more connected and equitable arts ecosystem for Houston. Participants agreed that progress depends on collective advocacy, stronger data systems, and continued collaboration among artists, organizations, civic leaders, and funders.

IV.

Arrivals, Breakfast & Networking

08:00 - 9:00 AM | Location: Grand Lobby



IV.

Welcome Remarks

09:00 - 9:30 AM | Location: Grand Lobby

REMARKS BY

Houston Poet Laureate
The Hobby Center for the
Performing Arts
Houston Endowment
Houston Arts Alliance
HouArts



The 2025 Greater Houston Arts Forum opened with welcome remarks from Houston Poet Laureate Reyes Ramirez and the Forum's host partners—Mark Folkes, President and CEO, the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts; Marci Dallas, Project Lead, HouArts; Grace Zuniga, Chief Programming Officer, Houston Arts Alliance, and Bao-Long Chu, Program Director, Arts & Culture, Greenspaces, Houston Endowment—who warmly welcomed artists, cultural workers, nonprofit leaders, funders, educators, and policymakers to the gathering.

The remarks acknowledged the significance of convening such a broad cross-section of the region's creative community in one place and recognized the Forum as a meaningful moment of connection for Houston's arts ecosystem. Opening reflections emphasized the power of shared presence and creative expression in bringing people together and set an invitational, community-centered tone for the day.

Delivered during National Arts and Humanities Month, the welcome remarks situated the Forum within a broader national celebration of creativity and culture, underscoring the importance of pausing to reflect, listen, and engage with one another. Speakers expressed gratitude to the many partners, collaborators, moderators, and panelists whose time, expertise, and leadership made the Forum possible, and acknowledged the role of collaboration in shaping a gathering that reflects Houston's diversity and creative energy. Participants were encouraged to approach the day with openness and curiosity, recognizing the arts as a longstanding catalyst for connection and change and affirming a shared commitment to the continued vitality of Greater Houston's creative community.

V. SESSIONS

Structuring Arts Data to Inform Arts Policy

09:40 - 10:40 AM | Location: Founders Club

SESSION ORGANIZER

Bao-Long Chu
Houston Endowment

SPEAKERS

Jana Fredricks
Founder and CEO,
Hatch Creative Strategy

Marci Dallas
Project Coordinator,
HouArts & Houston's
Cultural Districts

Angela Carranza
Executive Director,
Fresh Arts

Jaison Oliver
Manager, Third Ward
Cultural District

Craig Hauschildt
Executive Director,
Theater District



Houston Endowment is investing in building a stronger arts data infrastructure to help shift how our sector measures success and influences policy. This panel showcased how that investment is taking shape: the Theater District shared how data is guiding support for the theater sector; Fresh Arts introduced the upcoming Greater Houston Arts Survey launching in 2026; and Hatch Creative Strategy presented the new Cultural Districts Evaluation Initiative, designed to help cultural districts measure and narrate their impact. Third Ward Cultural District and HouArts in Action connected these efforts to the broader priorities of Houston's seven Cultural Districts, offering a glimpse of how data can power advocacy, collaboration, and change.

Key Takeaways:

1. BUILDING CAPACITY FOR DATA-INFORMED ADVOCACY

Houston Endowment's arts data and policy strategy aims to strengthen the region's advocacy capacity by helping the arts sector speak with a shared, data-informed voice.

Launched in 2022, this work began with funding and convening Houston's seven Cultural Districts and continues to evolve through partnerships focused on understanding, collecting, and sharing arts data that can inform public investment and policy decisions.

2. BUILDING A SHARED ARTS DATA ECOSYSTEM

Houston's Cultural Districts and partners are developing a unified data infrastructure to connect fragmented information across organizations, neighborhoods, and disciplines. This shared system will enable consistent measurement, support advocacy, and help the sector tell a cohesive story of its cultural and economic impact.

3. CENTERING EQUITY AND ARTIST VOICES

A central focus is ensuring that arts data reflects Houston's diversity and includes the experiences of artists, large, medium and small organizations, and community-driven work. New tools and surveys will capture the realities of creative professionals, access to space and resources, and barriers to sustainability. The goal is to create a more complete understanding of the arts landscape.

4. USING DATA TO DRIVE COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Data is being reframed as a tool for collaboration and civic engagement. Through shared metrics focused on cultural vibrancy, economic development, and community cohesion, the arts sector is aligning around common goals, strengthening advocacy capacity, and demonstrating the essential role of arts and culture in building a thriving, connected Houston.



V. SESSIONS

Vibrant Spaces: Tips on Activating your Cultural Landscape

09:40 - 10:40 AM | Location: Zilkha Hall

SESSION ORGANIZER

Sha Davis

Vibrant Spaces Working
Group Lead, HouArts

SPEAKERS

Stacey Allen

Founder and Artistic
Director, Nia's Daughters
Movement Collective

John Mgbeike

Director, Fresh Oranges

PREMO

muralist/creative



How do artists transform streets, neighborhoods, and everyday places into vibrant cultural hubs? In this session, Sha Davis, HouArts Vibrant Spaces Working Group Lead, brought together dancers, musicians and muralists, who are shaping Houston's public life. Through live storytelling, creative demonstrations, and interactive dialogue, participants explored strategies for activating space, centering artists in community development, and imagined new possibilities for Houston's cultural landscape.

This session wasn't just about ideas, it was about practice. Attendees experienced short activations from artists, engaged in real-time mapping of community needs, and contributed to a shared vision for what vibrant spaces can look like across Greater Houston.

Key Takeaways

1. ART AS A CATALYST FOR COMMUNITY CONNECTION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Artists across disciplines emphasized that activating public spaces through art, whether through dance, music, or murals, builds stronger community connections and fosters cultural pride. By bringing creativity into everyday environments, artists transform familiar spaces into places of belonging, inspiration, and shared experience.

2. INFRASTRUCTURE AND POLICY MUST EVOLVE TO SUPPORT VIBRANT SPACES

Panelists highlighted the need for more supportive city systems and policies to enable outdoor and public art. Challenges include limited infrastructure, unpredictable weather, and a lack of clarity about existing resources such as permitting and hotel occupancy tax (HOT) funds. A recurring theme was the importance of educating both artists and public officials about policies and funding mechanisms that already exist but are often underutilized.

3. COLLABORATION, EDUCATION, AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP DRIVE SUSTAINABILITY

Building and sustaining vibrant spaces depends on strong community networks. Artists discussed the importance of leading by example, mentoring younger creatives, and forming partnerships across disciplines and institutions. Collaboration strengthens the creative ecosystem and helps shift perceptions of artists from isolated individuals to essential contributors to local economies and civic life.

4. TAKE ACTION, START SMALL, LEARN, AND KEEP GOING

All panelists agreed that there is no perfect starting point. The key to activating space is to start with what you have, learn by doing, and build community along the way. Mistakes are part of the process, and persistence, paired with creativity and authenticity, ultimately leads to impact. Whether through grassroots organizing or public partnerships, consistent action and visibility are what drive Houston's growing arts vibrancy.



V. SESSIONS

Houston's Creative Edge: Growing Arts, Jobs, and Innovation

10:50 - 11:50 AM | Location: Zilkha Hall

SESSION ORGANIZER

Katie Creeggan-Ríos
Executive Director, Houston
Cinema Arts Society

SPEAKERS

Harrison Guy
Founder & Director, Urban
Souls Dance Company

Melissa McDonnell Luján
Co-Director and Chief
Operating Officer,
Contemporary
Arts Museum Houston

Gwen Watkins
Managing Director, Stages

Mark Folkes
President & CEO,
The Hobby Center for the
Performing Arts



This conversation brought together leaders from Houston's nonprofit and creative sectors to explore strategies for expanding the city's arts economy. Panelists discussed workforce development, sustainable job creation, cross-sector collaboration, and ways to elevate Houston's brand as a nationally recognized creative hub.

Key Takeaways:

1. COLLABORATION OVER COMPETITION

Panelists emphasized that breaking down silos in Houston's arts community begins with collaboration rooted in trust. Institutions, artists, and districts must see each other as partners rather than competitors for audiences or funding. True impact comes from long-term, relationship-based partnerships that align goals and share resources, rather than short-term marketing alliances.

2. REFRAMING HOUSTON'S ARTS IDENTITY

Houston's arts ecosystem is thriving but remains underrecognized. Participants called for a more confident and cohesive narrative that proudly showcases Houston as a cosmopolitan, world-class arts city. They urged institutions, media, and civic leaders to speak boldly about Houston's artistic excellence, cultural diversity, and significant investment in arts infrastructure. The arts should be seen as central to the city's civic and economic identity.

3. ELEVATING LOCAL TALENT AND SHARED ADVOCACY

The city's future depends on retaining and uplifting homegrown talent. Institutions were challenged to offer local artists the same visibility and resources provided to visiting performers, and to share data, pay standards, and opportunities transparently. Shared advocacy through initiatives like HouArts is essential for building unified messaging, influencing city policy, and ensuring that artists and arts workers are recognized as vital to Houston's economy.

4. BUILDING A CULTURE OF OPENNESS, INNOVATION, AND BELONGING

Panelists called for a shift toward openness and experimentation, encouraging organizations to share information freely, embrace technology partnerships, and involve artists in city planning and cultural policy. They encouraged artists to create work "brick by brick," even without institutional backing, and to take pride in Houston's affordability, diversity, and entrepreneurial energy. In Houston, they agreed, artists can thrive while staying true to themselves.



V. SESSIONS

Creative Economy in Action: Pathways for Artists & Creatives to Thrive in Houston

10:50 - 11:50 AM | Location: Founders Club

SESSION ORGANIZER

RUEROB

Economic Opportunity Working
Group Lead, HouArts

SPEAKERS

Charity Edison Carter

Founder and Executive Director,
Edison Arts Foundation

Eepi Chad

Professional Development
Program Manager, Mid-
America Arts Alliance

Gracie Chavez

Programs Director,
Fresh Arts



Houston's creative economy is diverse, dynamic, and deeply connected to the region's cultural identity. From film and music to fashion, design, and performance, artists and cultural workers fuel economic growth, tourism, and innovation. Yet many face persistent challenges to sustaining their careers—affordability, access to opportunities, and visibility in larger economic systems.

This panel brought together leaders from across Houston's creative sectors to explore the opportunities and barriers facing today's artists and entrepreneurs. Panelists shared insights from their industries, discussed strategies for building sustainable creative careers, and highlighted solutions that can help artists and creatives not only remain in Houston, but thrive here.

Organized by the HouArts Economic Opportunity Working Group Lead, this session surfaced practical ideas for strengthening workforce pipelines, deepening tourism partnerships, and advancing policies that ensure the arts are recognized as essential to Houston's economic vitality and civic future.

Key Takeaways:

1. STRENGTHENING HOUSTON'S CREATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

Houston's arts ecosystem needs stronger support systems to sustain artists and cultural workers. Panelists identified the lack of healthcare access, limited funding opportunities, and weak infrastructure as

major barriers. They called for cross-sector partnerships that combine arts, housing, healthcare, and community development, emphasizing that collaboration is essential to building a thriving and equitable creative economy.

2. BUILDING PROFESSIONAL AND LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS FOR ARTISTS

Artists need more business training and leadership development to build sustainable careers. Speakers encouraged integrating professional development into arts programs and supporting artists in taking on civic and corporate leadership roles. Expanding access to mentorship and training through organizations such as Fresh Arts, Mid-America Arts Alliance, and Edison Arts Foundation will help artists strengthen their business acumen and influence policy decisions.

3. SUPPORTING GIG WORKERS AND RECOGNIZING THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

The creative workforce is a vital part of Houston's economy, yet gig workers lack consistent financial and social support. Panelists stressed the need for education in tax management, business formation, and health coverage tailored to freelance artists. Recognizing gig work as a legitimate economic model and scaling short-term gigs into formal enterprises would help stabilize Houston's growing creative economy.

4. COLLABORATION AND RESOURCE SHARING AS THE PATH FORWARD

Collaboration across disciplines, sectors, and regions is central to building a resilient creative ecosystem. Successful models such as the Edison Arts Foundation's multi-sector partnerships demonstrate how to combine resources for greater community benefit. Artists were encouraged to engage actively in working groups, forums, and local advocacy networks like HouArts to share information, expand visibility, and collectively shape policy and funding priorities.



V. SESSIONS

Creative Bridges: A Deep Dive into Houston's Arts Ecosystem

12:45 - 1:45 PM | Location: Grand Lobby

SESSION ORGANIZER

Chelsea Benoit

Finance and
Database Coordinator,
Houston Arts Alliance

SPEAKERS

Taylor Jackson

CEO, Houston Arts Alliance

Harrison Guy

Collaboration Lead, HouArts

Angela Carranza

Executive Director,
FreshArts

Jack McBride

Executive Director,
Arts Connect

Randee Ramsey

Executive Director, Southwest
Alternate Media Project

Katie Creeggan-Ríos

Executive Director, Houston
Cinema Arts Society

Mollie Haven Miller

Executive Director,
Dance Source Houston

Sixto Wagan

Executive Director,
BIPOC Arts and Network Fund

Craig Hauschildt

Executive Director,
Theater District Houston

Deborah Lugo

Vice President of
Programming and Education,
The Hobby Center

Gracie Chávez

Founding Music Officer for City
of Houston, Board Official for the
Houston Music Advisory Board

Dr. Gabriela Baeza Ventura

Director,
Arte Público Press



Houston Arts | Ecosystem | Community Resources | Arts Organizations | Artist Support

This lunchtime panel featured representatives from several Houston-based art organizations spanning multiple disciplines within the creative ecosystem including visual arts, dance, film, theater, and arts administration. Panelists highlighted their organizational work and the resources they provide to support local artists, organizations, and creatives. The discussion also explored Houston's current creative landscape, expectations for the future, and how these organizations are addressing challenges faced by the local community to create a thriving and sustainable creative ecosystem.

Key Takeaways:

1. HOUSTON'S ARTS ECOSYSTEM IS BROAD AND INTERCONNECTED

The session showcased the strength of Houston's arts infrastructure through a range of organizations that support every discipline from dance and theater to visual art, literature, and film. Each organization contributes unique programs that serve artists and communities, from Fresh Arts' space-taking residencies to Arte Público Press's community archiving and publishing initiatives. Together, these efforts demonstrate how Houston's creative sector is diverse, collaborative, and capable of addressing community needs through innovation and partnership.

2. EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY REQUIRE FOCUSED, INTENTIONAL ACTION

Panelists emphasized that creating equity in the arts means moving beyond symbolic diversity toward meaningful inclusion. This includes investing in artists and organizations that serve underrepresented communities, addressing transportation and geographic barriers, and celebrating cultural specificity rather than trying to serve everyone at once. True accessibility depends on meeting people where they are and ensuring that funding, visibility, and support reach the artists and communities that need them most.

3. COLLABORATION AND SHARED KNOWLEDGE STRENGTHEN THE SECTOR

Many speakers pointed out that information-sharing and partnership are essential to building a sustainable creative community. Organizations were encouraged to move away from competition and toward collaboration, sharing resources such as funding strategies, data, and professional development. Participants stressed the importance of unified advocacy through initiatives like HouArts, which aim to align messaging, coordinate action, and represent the collective voice of Houston's cultural community.

4. SUSTAINING MOMENTUM THROUGH EDUCATION, INCLUSION, AND STORYTELLING

The conversation closed with a call to maintain the current spirit of collaboration and advocacy. Panelists highlighted the need to educate the public about the arts' civic and economic value, include young people as future artists and leaders, and actively tell Houston's story on a national scale. Building pride, sharing accurate information, and expanding arts education were seen as the keys to keeping Houston's arts ecosystem strong, inclusive, and forward-looking.



V. SESSIONS

Storycraft: Building Houston's Cultural Narrative for the Global Stage

1:50 - 2:50 PM | Location: Grand Lobby

SESSION ORGANIZER

Claudia de Vasco
Effective Storytelling Working
Group Lead, HouArts

FACILITATORS

Joel Luks
Chief Strategy Officer, CKP

Carey Kirkpatrick
CEO and Founder, CKP



This collaborative workshop engaged participants in exploring the narratives that shape Houston's reputation as a creative city and cultural destination. Together, participants co-created ideas by first highlighting the stories that already define Houston's creative spirit, then considered which narratives deserve greater amplification. Together, they collaboratively mapped how artists, organizations, and advocates can craft a story big enough—and true enough—to put Houston where it belongs on the cultural map. In this working session, participants actively surfaced the narratives, values, and perspectives that can elevate Houston's cultural profile and strengthen its position as a cultural capital. The dialogue in this session informed the work of the HouArts Effective Storytelling Working Group which has a goal of communicating the richness of Houston's arts and culture sector.

Key Takeaways:

1. HOUSTON NEEDS A UNIFIED CULTURAL NARRATIVE

Participants agreed that Houston's arts and culture sector is vibrant, diverse, and innovative, but its story is fragmented. The city lacks a unified message that communicates its creative identity both locally and nationally. Building a shared narrative will help residents, leaders, and visitors recognize Houston as a true cultural capital and support long-term advocacy, funding, and visibility.

2. STORYTELLING SHOULD REFLECT HOUSTON'S AUTHENTIC DIVERSITY

Speakers emphasized that Houston's strength lies in its multiplicity. The city's cultural identity is a mosaic of communities, traditions, and art forms rather than a single story. Effective storytelling should reflect that layered diversity while celebrating collaboration, experimentation, and the sense of ownership that artists and audiences feel across neighborhoods.

3. DATA, EMOTION, AND AUTHENTICITY ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE MESSAGE

Developing a compelling narrative requires combining truth and emotion. Participants discussed how data gives credibility, while emotion makes stories memorable. Houston's future cultural messaging should connect facts about the city's diversity, innovation, and scale with authentic human stories that evoke pride, belonging, and curiosity.

4. COLLABORATION AND PARTICIPATION WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE STORY

The session marked the beginning of a long-term effort to co-create Houston's arts narrative through community engagement. Attendees were invited to join the new Effective Storytelling Work Group to continue shaping this shared vision. Ongoing conversations, open meetings, and inclusive outreach will ensure that Houston's cultural story belongs to everyone—from major institutions to neighborhood artists.



What's on the Ballot?

3:00-4:00 PM | Location: Founders Club

SPEAKERS

Jack McBride
Executive Director, Arts Connect

Kathryn McNeil
Public Affairs Lead, HouArts

Jason Oliver
Advocacy Lead, HouArts



This session broke down what's at stake in the upcoming elections in Houston—from city council to school boards—and how these roles impact funding, education, and public support for the arts. We looked at candidate responses to questions about the arts, talked through how to reach out to candidates, and shared tips for staying engaged beyond just voting.

With at least three important upcoming elections for 2026 on January 31, March 3, and November 3, arts organizations and advocates can help ensure that we have strong champions in public office.

Key Takeaways:

1. THE ARTS ARE DEEPLY CONNECTED TO PUBLIC POLICY

Panelists reminded participants that political decisions at every level—from city council to Congress—directly affect arts funding, education, and visibility. Elections matter for the creative sector because they determine policies on issues such as hotel occupancy tax allocations, cultural district support, and arts education resources. Understanding how political systems function helps artists and organizations protect and expand their role in civic life.

2. LOCAL ELECTIONS AND SCHOOL BOARDS SHAPE HOUSTON'S ARTS FUTURE

The session highlighted the critical importance of school board elections, particularly given the ongoing HISD state takeover. Elected trustees, once restored, will influence arts education budgets, staffing, and programming for years to come. Participants were encouraged to follow local elections, learn about candidates, and ask specific questions about their positions on arts education and cultural policy to ensure that creative learning remains a priority in Houston-area schools.

3. ADVOCACY DEPENDS ON CONSISTENCY, COLLABORATION, AND EDUCATION

Sustained advocacy requires persistence and collective effort rather than one-time action. Panelists shared examples of successful campaigns—such as consistent community pressure leading to HISD hiring a new Director of Fine Arts—to show that steady engagement works. Advocacy also includes educating candidates and elected officials about the role of the arts in public safety, mental health, and community development, ensuring that the arts are viewed as essential rather than optional.

4. ARTISTS AND ORGANIZATIONS MUST ENGAGE POLITICALLY WITH CONFIDENCE

Participants discussed how nonprofits and artists can legally advocate for the arts without violating funding restrictions. Issue-based advocacy, public education, and sharing questions or policy priorities with candidates are all permitted. The conversation underscored the need for more voter education, civic participation, and clarity on how creative professionals can speak up for their sector. Empowering the arts community to participate in democracy strengthens the entire ecosystem.



V. SESSIONS

The Artist as Entrepreneur: Building a Sustainable Creative Career

3:00 - 4:00 PM | Location: Zilkha Hall

SESSION ORGANIZER

Randee Ramsey
Executive Director, Southwest
Alternate Media Project

SPEAKERS

RUEROB
Economic Opportunity Working
Group Lead, HouArts

Robert Hodge
Multidisciplinary Artist

Jalene Mack
Lawyer, Actress,
Producer & Author



Being an artist today means balancing creativity with entrepreneurship. This professional development session guided artists through the essential skills needed to thrive in both worlds. Participants explored how to develop an entrepreneurial mindset, identify and communicate their unique value, and built strategies for marketing, networking, and financial sustainability. The session also addressed common challenges—such as pricing your work, managing multiple revenue streams, and balancing artistic integrity with business growth.

Key Takeaways:

1. ARTISTIC INTEGRITY AND BUSINESS STRATEGY MUST COEXIST

Panelists emphasized that successful creative entrepreneurs must balance the act of creating with the practicalities of business. Artists should focus first on producing authentic work that reflects their true voice and values, and then learn to switch into a business mindset to manage strategy, funding, and promotion. Treating art as both a passion and a business allows creative work to be sustainable over time.

2. EDUCATION, MENTORSHIP, AND COMMUNITY ARE ESSENTIAL

Artists often leave school without practical business skills such as writing contracts, managing budgets, or pricing their work. The panel stressed the importance of mentorship, collaboration, and peer learning to fill those gaps. Building community and investing in relationships with other artists can provide knowledge, opportunities, and long-term support that help sustain an artistic career.

3. AUTHENTIC BRANDING AND PURPOSE CREATE LONGEVITY

Defining a personal brand begins with understanding one's purpose and values. Panelists described branding as an evolving process rooted in self-awareness, authenticity, and storytelling. An artist's brand should grow from lived experience and reflect both the work and the person behind it. Staying authentic to one's story and community builds trust and recognition over time.

4. PROFESSIONAL DISCIPLINE AND ENTREPRENEURIAL STRUCTURE SUSTAIN GROWTH

Panelists encouraged artists to view themselves as small business owners. Best practices include creating schedules, setting short- and long-term goals, forming teams, budgeting realistically, and protecting intellectual property. Adopting professional habits while remaining adaptable and open to tools like social media and AI helps artists stay organized, avoid burnout, and expand their creative impact.



To Infinity and Beyond: The Power of Creative Collaboration

4:15 - 5:15 PM | Location: Founders Club

SESSION ORGANIZER

Vincent Powell



This wasn't just a closing session — it's a creative launch pad.

In "To Infinity and Beyond," Vincent Powell delivered a keynote-style activation using Pixar's Toy Story as a metaphor for embracing change, staying mission-driven, and building with intention. Attendees then moved into structured, energizing networking experiences that turned inward reflection into outward collaboration.

Through two interactive activations — the Vision Wall and Spark Tables — participants shared their boldest ideas, connected with future collaborators, and contributed to a living mosaic of Houston's creative future. The session closed with audience reflections, social sharing prompts, and a call to partnership and momentum that flowed directly into the reception.

This wasn't a mixer, but it was a movement moment for those ready to lead and lift Houston's cultural ecosystem... together.

Key Takeaways:

1. CREATIVITY AND IDENTITY ARE INTERTWINED

The speaker reflected on the constant tension between innovation and self-identity, urging artists to stay grounded in who they are even as technology and cultural trends evolve. True creativity comes from authenticity rather than imitation, and every artist's voice remains essential, regardless of shifting mediums or new tools.

2. GROWTH REQUIRES CURIOSITY AND COURAGE

Change is inevitable, but growth is a choice. The session encouraged artists to approach uncertainty with curiosity rather than fear, to take risks, and to push past self-doubt. Returning to a childlike sense of wonder allows creators to experiment freely, take bold chances, and discover new artistic possibilities.

3. COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY SUSTAIN CREATIVE WORK

Collaboration was presented not only as a creative strategy but as the foundation for long-term success. Sharing ideas, seeking partnerships, and being open to others' input can help revive stalled projects and expand artistic impact. Building genuine relationships within the creative community ensures that art continues to evolve collectively rather than in isolation.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY AND VISION DRIVE CREATIVE PURPOSE

Artists were reminded that their creative dreams have value only when acted upon. Accountability from peers and persistence in pursuing unfinished projects help turn ideas into reality. The session closed with a call to articulate bold creative goals, lean into community support, and trust that every unfinished story still has a next chapter waiting to be written.



V. SESSIONS

Public Funding for the Arts in the Greater Houston Region

4:15 - 5:15 PM | Location: Zilkha Hall

SESSION ORGANIZER

Michelle Bonton
Public Funding Working
Group Lead, HouArts

SPEAKERS

Erica Lee Carter
Policy Director, Office of
Commissioner Rodney Ellis

Nicole DeGuzman
Executive Director, the Pearl
Fincher Museum of Fine Arts

Cynthia Alvarado
Director, Operations and
Strategic Planning, Midtown

Quang Vu
Director of Grants,
Houston Arts Alliance



Public investment in the arts fuels vibrant communities, drives economic growth, and ensures all residents—regardless of zip code—can access creative experiences. This presentation explored the current landscape of public funding for the arts, highlighted key funding streams that support nonprofit cultural organizations, and identified opportunities to expand those investments through advocacy. Attendees learned about existing sources of federal, state, and local arts funding, understanding gaps in current support, and discovered how unified efforts across the arts sector can influence policy and allocation decisions. Whether you're an executive director, teaching artist, board member, or cultural advocate, this session provided actionable insights on how to protect and grow public investment in the arts—and offered immediate ways to get involved in shaping a more equitable, sustainable future for our creative ecosystem.

Key Takeaways:

1. PUBLIC FUNDING FOR THE ARTS REQUIRES AWARENESS AND ACCESS

Panelists emphasized that public funding comes from many sources at the federal, state, county, and city levels. Opportunities exist through the National Endowment for the Arts, Texas Commission on the Arts, the City of Houston, county precincts, and management districts and TIRZs. Artists and organizations must learn how these systems work and proactively research how to access available funds rather than waiting for information to reach them.

2. ADVOCACY AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING ARE ESSENTIAL

A recurring theme was the importance of showing up, speaking out, and building long-term relationships with public officials. Participants were urged to attend city council meetings, commissioner court sessions, and cultural committee meetings, even when no immediate funding is at stake. Consistent visibility, gratitude for existing support, and positive storytelling about the arts help strengthen credibility and ensure that arts funding remains a civic priority.

3. COLLECTIVE ACTION PROTECTS AND EXPANDS RESOURCES

The panel shared an example from the Midtown Management District, where \$200,000 in cultural arts funding was nearly lost due to lack of attendance from the arts community. The funding was later restored after coordinated advocacy by HouArts and local partners. This story underscored that when the arts community does not show up, funding can disappear, but collective organization and shared advocacy can reverse such losses and secure future investments.

4. POLICY ENGAGEMENT CREATES LONG-TERM CHANGE

Speakers discussed policy initiatives such as Harris County's proposed "Percent for Art" program, which would dedicate a portion of county capital project budgets to public art. While initially focused on visual art, the program could open doors for broader funding in the future. Participants were encouraged to advocate for this and other structural reforms, including alignment of city and county hotel occupancy tax policies, to create more equitable and sustainable support for artists across disciplines.



VI. ARTISTS HIGHLIGHTS

PERFORMERS

Marion DuBose
Violinist

Hope Cowan
Harpist

Open Door Mission Choir

Contemporary
Handweavers of Houston



VII. INFORMATION EXCHANGE

INFORMATION BOOTHS

Fresh Arts / Arts District Houston

Arts Connect Houston

Houston Arts Alliance

Indian Performing Arts Samskriti

Houston's Cultural Districts

BIPOC Arts Network Fund

Dance Source Houston

Houston Cinema Arts Society



VII. INFORMATION EXCHANGE

INFORMATION BOOTHS

Hobby Center of Performing Arts

Arte Público Press

ALMAAHH Houston

SWAMP: Southwest Alternate Media Project

Islamic Arts Society



VIII. NATIONAL ARTS AND HUMANITIES MONTH RECEPTION

SPEAKERS

Ann Stern

President and CEO,
Houston Endowment Inc.

Reyes Ramirez

Houston Poet Laureate

Bao-Long Chu

Houston Endowment Inc.

Mario Castillo

Council Member, District H



AFTER THE FORUM WAS A RECEPTION CELEBRATING NATIONAL ARTS AND HUMANITIES MONTH...

Collaboration, Shared Vision, and Data Strengthen Arts Advocacy

Speakers from Houston Endowment emphasized that the arts are strongest when artists, organizations, districts, and funders work together toward a shared vision. Collaboration through platforms like HouArts allows the community to combine data, stories, and advocacy to amplify collective impact and drive meaningful citywide progress. Speakers highlighted that credible data and powerful storytelling are essential tools for demonstrating how the arts contribute to the region's economic growth, public health, education, and overall civic vitality.

Recognition and Partnership Across All Levels of Leadership

City and state officials, including Council Member Mario Castillo and Senator Carol Alvarado, reaffirmed their commitment to arts and culture through official proclamations of October as National Arts and Humanities Month. Their participation highlighted the relationship between government, philanthropy, and the creative community, as well as the importance of civic leadership in sustaining Houston's cultural vitality.

Artists Have a Responsibility to Educate, Mentor, and Organize

Houston Poet Laureate Reyes Ramirez closed the event with a reminder that art does not exist in isolation. When artists are not creating, they should be teaching, mentoring, or organizing within their communities. Art gains power when it is shared and when it connects people across generations, disciplines, and neighborhoods. Together, the creative community can ensure that Houston's story continues to grow in both local and global conversations.

