

Architecting Sustainable Futures: Investigating Financial Sustainability in Small Museums and Community-Based Archives Using New Orleans as a Model

Small museums and community-based archives focused on preserving the histories and culture of marginalized communities are essential threads of the cultural landscape, yet in cities like New Orleans, they receive a tiny portion of financial support given to culture and arts organizations in the region. This inequity is typical of the cultural funding landscape in the United States, in which some of these organizations have found ways to thrive, while others barely keep the doors open with volunteer staff, individual donations and memberships.

Efforts of Grace Inc. and Ashé Cultural Arts Center, in collaboration with Shift, Helicon Collaborative and the Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO), proposes a one year NLG Diversity and Inclusion Research Grant to study and report on the role small museums and community-based archives focused on preserving the histories and culture of marginalized people play in the welfare of their communities, the value they bring to the local cultural economy and potential models for their financial sustainability.

Architecting Sustainable Futures: Investigating Financial Sustainability Models in Small Museums and Community-Based Archives in New Orleans (ASF-NOLA) will examine the following research questions:

1. What role do these small museums and community-based archives play in the welfare of their communities, particularly those most vulnerable to displacement? What role do they play in the larger cultural economy?
2. How have small museums and community-based archives focused on preserving the histories and culture of marginalized communities attained financial sustainability, and what are the largest barriers to achieving financial sustainability?
3. How can these organizations be best supported so that they can be self-sufficient, and how can we replicate and amplify successful models already in practice?

This research will focus on the cultural heritage sector in New Orleans, but will utilize a methodology that can be replicated in any city or region to identify both local strategies and national trends. This consists of data analysis of the existing cultural heritage funding landscape, as well as a discovery and design workshop and interviews with practitioners to identify both successful strategies and barriers to financial sustainability. The work will build on existing research including *Architecting Sustainable Futures* led by Shift, and *Not Just Money* led by Helicon Collaborative, with research support from the SUNO MA in Museum Studies Program.

This project will achieve the following objectives critical to diversity and inclusion in the museum field:

1. Create a community-driven and participatory model for cultural research that can advance interests of small museums and community-based archives in New Orleans and serve as a model for such entities in other communities
2. Identify successful financial models for small cultural heritage organizations which make up the majority of museums, while examining barriers to financial sustainability for marginalized communities.
3. Identify the ways in which small museums and community-based archives contribute to community health and vitality, including their roles in preserving and transmitting positive community narratives, building social cohesion, encouraging inter-generational communication and the transfer of knowledge, and organizing communities to protect and advance their interests
4. Share a model for research that can observe national funding trends and define a process for translating national data to useful local data.
5. Create a web-based report that consolidates research and provides a toolset for small museums and community-based archives that are focused on marginalized communities to develop strategies for sustainability.