

2021–2023

Grounded in Place, Growing Our Power:

Reflections on
Three Years of
Humanities in Place
Grantmaking

Mellon
Foundation

Part I

What is *Humanities in Place?*

“Place” is more than a geographic location. It is a concept inextricably linked to language, culture, history, art, and knowledge production. It informs the rituals and daily practices of community. It provides the foundation for individual and shared identity. There is no place that is separate or apart from people.

For communities whose stories and identities have been neglected, lost, threatened, or persecuted, the work of place-making and place-keeping is especially vital. It offers an opportunity not only to repair and recover essential cultural heritage but also to renew and rejoice in a more inclusive, more creative future.

The Mellon Foundation’s Humanities in Place program (HiP) preserves, revitalizes, and celebrates these generative places, and helps resource the individuals, organizations, and communities leading this work—particularly those whose communities and identities remain historically underserved, minoritized, and marginalized. In doing so, the program addresses an urgent need to expand the public expression of the histories, values, and narratives that shape our public and private lives.

Mellon launched Humanities in Place in December 2020, the Foundation’s first newly established program area in more than 30 years, to support storytelling, preservation, and public spaces across the country. The goals of Humanities in Place are both straightforward and radical: elevate undervalued experiences and bring underrecognized stories into the national dialogue; revitalize the places that hold those stories; and support people and organizations working to build deeper, more meaningful human connections in their communities.

By exploring and honoring a more complete—and more accurate—range of American histories, narratives, and cultures, HiP fulfills Mellon’s core values and mission: “that the arts and humanities are where we express our complex humanity, and that everyone deserves the beauty, transcendence, and freedom to be found there.” Like all Mellon grantmaking, HiP “seeks to build just communities enriched by meaning and empowered by critical thinking, where ideas and imagination can thrive.” The program also advances Mellon’s mandate under the leadership of the Foundation’s president, Elizabeth Alexander, and Board of Trustees that all Mellon’s work be assessed through the lens of social justice.

To that end, through Humanities in Place Mellon devotes significant intellectual and financial resources to identifying, documenting, and elevating projects in and by historically underrepresented and under-resourced communities, as well as supporting members of these communities so that they can lead those projects. The ultimate goal of the HiP program is to promote tangible, locally imagined, and locally led initiatives to help transform America’s cultural landscape toward justice and to better reflect our full histories, complexities, and multitudes. HiP calls in more people—from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences—to connect with place, knowledge, art, culture, history, and, most importantly, one another.

HiP works with media, heritage, public spaces, museums and other historical institutions, artists, and conveners of shared experiences, including the digital and ephemeral. The program works across and within diverse communities and deliberately seeks out and supports programs and organizations with bold, creative, and inclusive approaches, opening the door to new practices and methodologies.

Humanities in Place grantmaking spans three interconnected programmatic strategies: Keep and Shape Our Places (KSOP), Evolve Our Institutions (EOI), and Promote Greater Engagement and Understanding (PGEU). These strategies are neither intended nor used as restrictive, either/or categories for grantmaking. Many HiP grantees operate at the intersection of multiple program strategies—and, indeed, the value and success of their projects stem from the inclusive nature of the work. Rather, these strategies describe HiP’s prioritization and overarching programmatic goals.

HiP has advanced each strategy through grants ranging from \$100,000 to \$7.5 million on one- to five-year terms. Large grants often resource built projects, while others support grantees in their efforts to “keep and shape” their places, providing opportunities for the continued presence, sustenance, and growth of Black,

Strategies

Keep and Shape Our Places

Resource projects, initiatives, and infrastructure that help identify, document, create, and care for places to design a more just present and future landscape.

Evolve Our Institutions

Catalyze initiatives and programs that support the evolution and sustainability of institutions (civic, cultural, educational, or community) focused on advancing social justice through place-based approaches.

Promote Greater Engagement and Understanding

Support projects and programs that increase access, interaction, and exchange of stories to build a broader understanding of history, thereby fortifying democracy, civic power, and cultural expression.

Indigenous, and Latinx communities and cultures that have survived displacement, dispossession, and disinvestment. As of December 2023, HiP has given 176 grants, supporting 158 projects across multiple communities, representing 86 cities and a broad geographic reach. These projects reflect the creativity, commitment, and spirit of a diverse slate of grantees.

Grantmaking by the numbers

176
Grants

\$613K
Median grant

158
Grantees

39%
Unsolicited grants

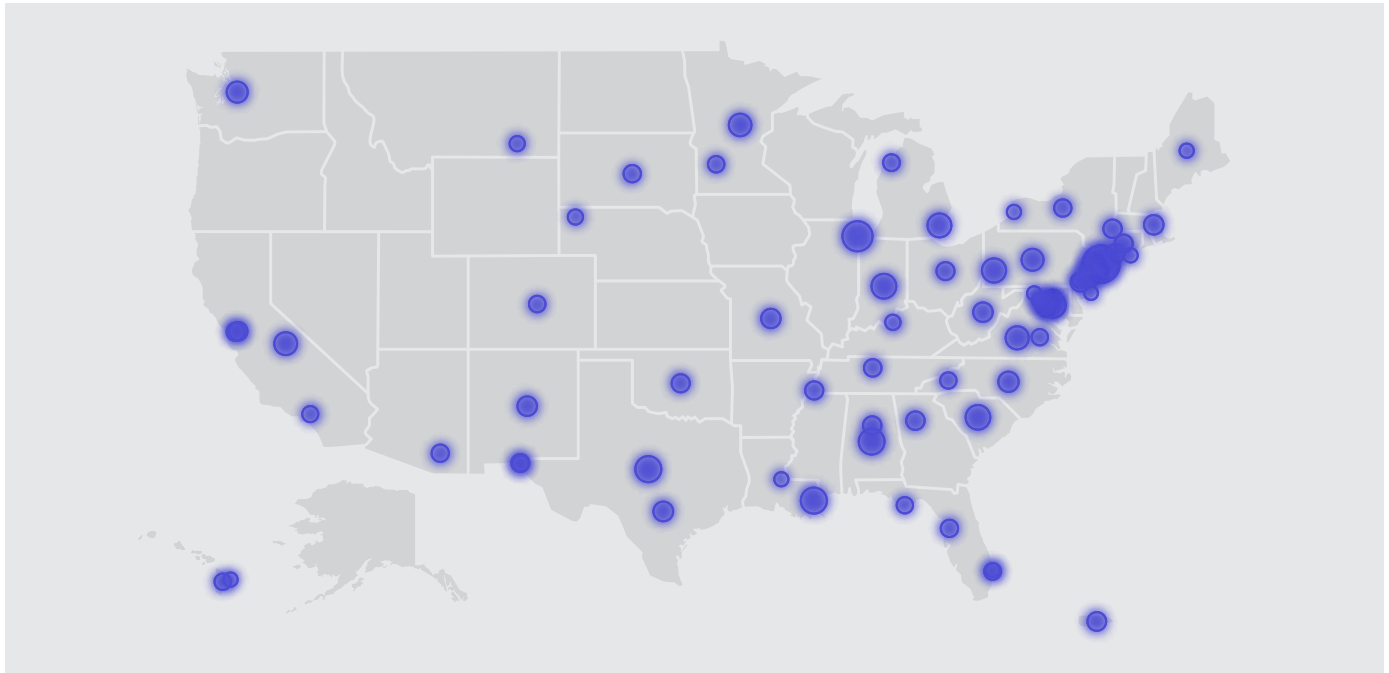
\$152.8M
Total funds

78%
New grantees

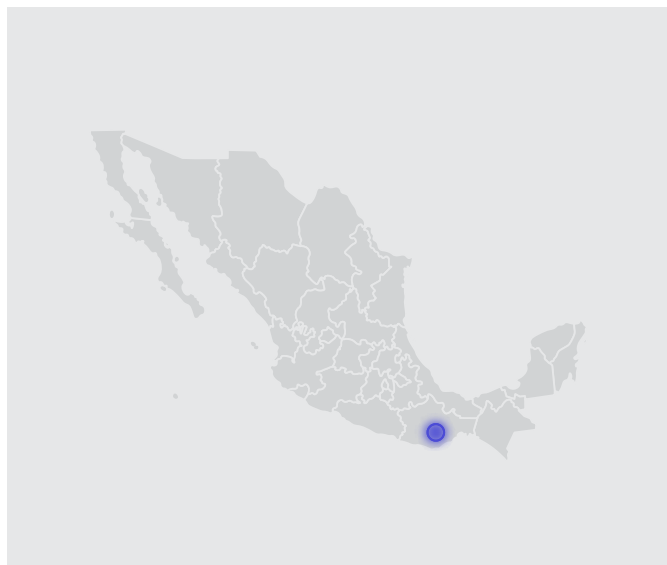
\$7.5M
Largest grant

Figure I

Grant activity locations



United States (including Puerto Rico)



Mexico



Africa

Figure II

Number of grants by organization

- **Social & community**
47 grants
- **Museums & historical**
31 grants
- **Arts (non-museums)**
30 grants
- **Professional associations & nonprofit service**
29 grants
- **Higher education & training**
28 grants
- **Publishing & broadcast**
6 grants
- **Parks & gardens**
4 grants
- **Libraries & archives**
1 grants

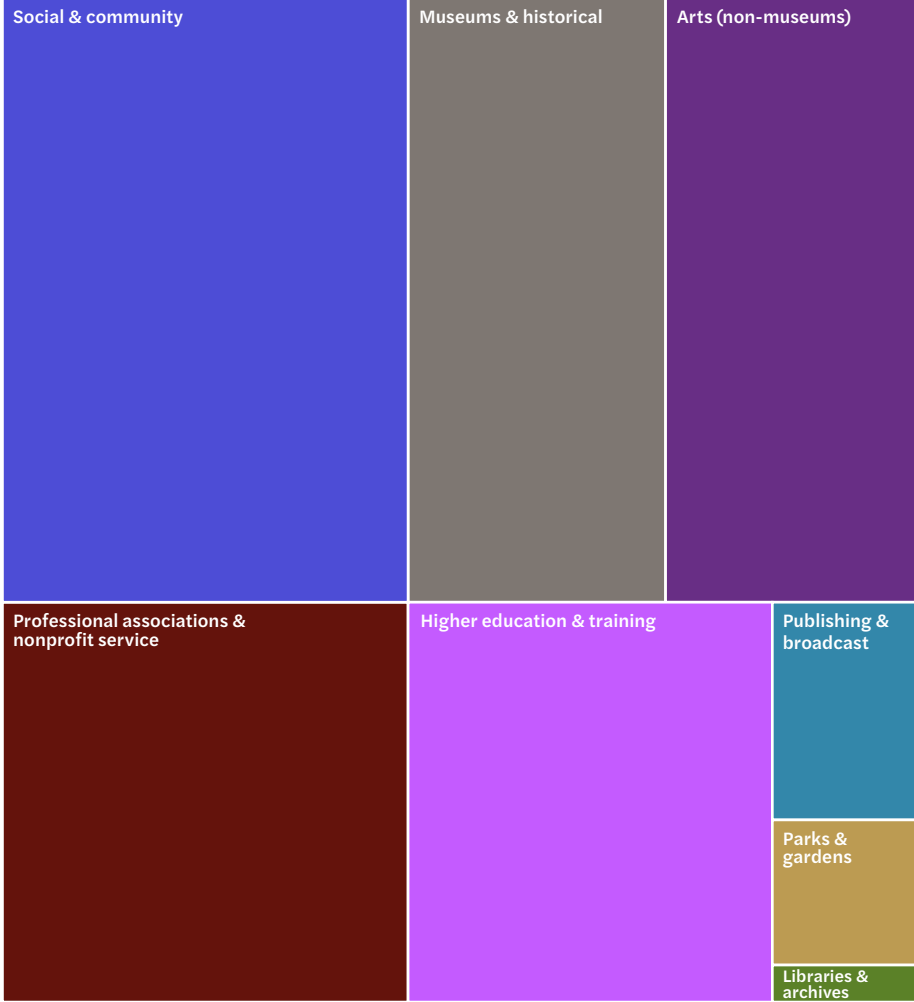
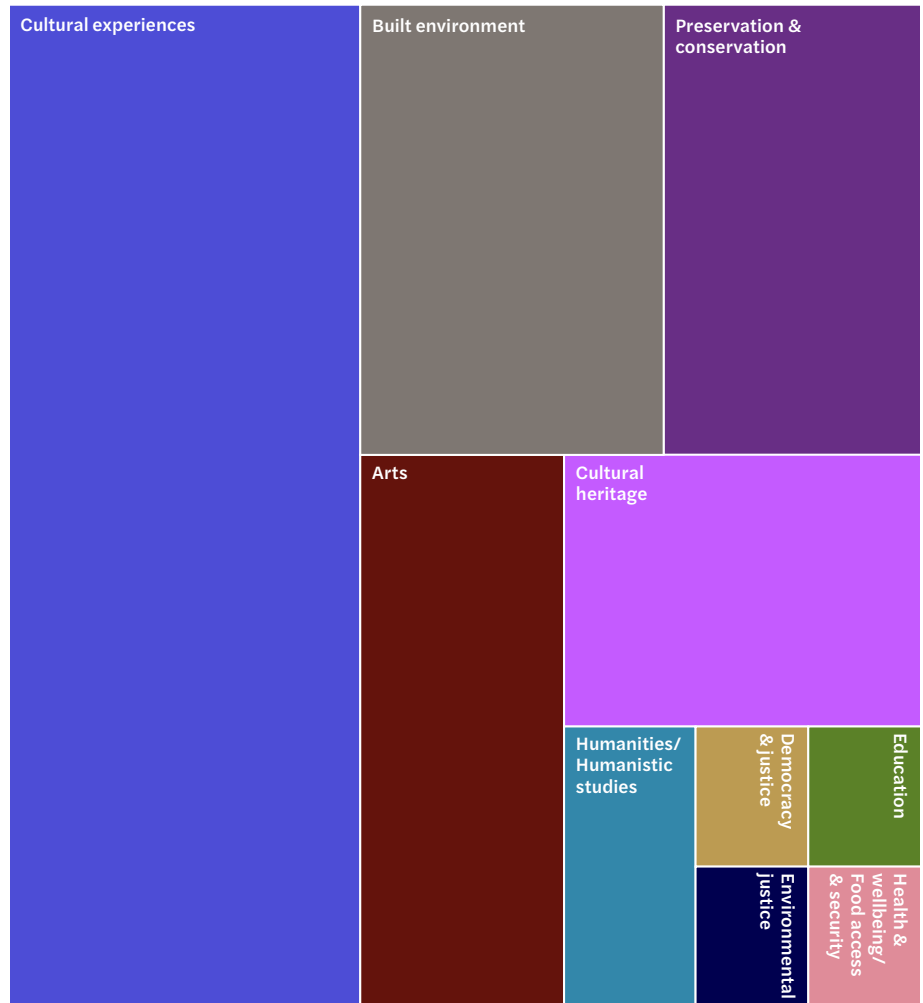


Figure III

Number of grants by top subjects

- **Cultural experiences**
134 grants
Black or African American: 82
Native & indigenous: 20
Hispanic, Latino, Latina or Latinx: 13
Immigrant & refugee: 12
Asian or Asian American: 7
- **Built environment**
52 grants
- **Preservation & conservation**
44 grants
Historical preservation: 36
Preservation & conservation: 8
- **Arts**
43 grants
Arts: 18
Performing arts: 15
Visual arts: 10
- **Cultural heritage**
37 grants
- **Humanities/Humanistic studies**
14 grants
African & African-American studies: 7
Food studies: 7
- **Democracy & justice**
6 grants
- **Education**
6 grants
- **Environmental justice**
6 grants
- **Health & wellbeing/
Food access & security**
6 grants



Part II

Grantmaking

Approach

The Humanities in Place grantmaking approach is grounded in the idea that social justice and spatial justice are inextricably linked. The program’s work acknowledges that space and place matter and directs resources to address the legacies of inequality that have shaped our landscapes, cities, and communities. By supporting organizations and work in places that have been historically under-resourced and subject to social, economic, and environmental harm we seek to both see and set new patterns that value multitudes of people, places, and experiences.

The Humanities in Place program embraces a distinct place-based grantmaking approach and operates with a vision of seeding, watering, and nurturing growth in the varied communities and environments that align with Mellon’s social justice mission. Upon entering a community, the program prioritizes learning and understanding the local dynamics, identifying where its strategic grantmaking can yield the most fruitful results. This approach is exemplified in the program’s initiatives in the Black Belt region of Alabama, along the Gullah Geechee coast, and in the US–Mexico borderlands as well as in urban centers such as Baltimore, Chicago, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York, and Pittsburgh. The program extends its impact to the broader African Diaspora and Black Atlantic context on an international scale. Notably, the program’s focus isn’t everywhere; it is rooted in places and networks where its efforts can dive deep, where they are desperately needed, and where the potential for sustainable flourishing is most promising. HiP understands that the work cannot be one-and-done; by taking this ecosystems approach, HiP seeks to make the necessary investment to reach a critical “tipping point” for long-term sustainability and flourishing. This deliberate and strategic commitment underscores the program’s dedication to making a meaningful and lasting impact.

The program exists within a much broader place-based ecosystem—one that includes practitioners, conservationists, grassroots organizers, scholars, activists, and, of course, other funders. Among these organizations and initiatives whose work and impact intersect with HiP’s are community-level foundations, other national funders, social justice groups, collaborative community development organizations, arts and culture initiatives, and local, state, and federal government.

Under the leadership of President Elizabeth Alexander, all four of Mellon’s core grantmaking areas—Higher Learning, Arts and Culture, Public Knowledge, and Humanities in Place—are forward-looking and social justice-oriented, problem-solving to right historic wrongs in the fields addressed by Mellon funds. Aimed at expanding, improving, and democratizing field practices and processes, while also expanding the number and diversity of practitioners and practices, each program works to reimagine the ways in which a legacy funder can advance liberation and justice—both internally and in the broader world.

Like much of Mellon’s grantmaking, HiP’s approach is rooted in the core belief that grantees should lead the work. HiP’s role is to partner and support, rather than prescribe; to help communities and neighborhoods build what they envision for themselves. As HiP Program Director Justin Garrett Moore has said, “The grantee is the expert in their work. They are the experts on their history in their communities.”

While grantees lead the work on the ground, HiP is positioned to bring national expertise and think across disciplines, institutions, and geographies. As a funder with national and global scope and reach, the program has the unique capacity to consider what it means, at scale, to connect with a broad range of communities, histories, and understandings—and to connect those individuals and organizations to each other.

In 2022, Humanities in Place launched a year-long learning and reflection process to reflect on the program’s work to date. The process centered on a series of fundamental questions: *What do we mean when we say “humanities in place”? What is this work? Where and how does it happen? Who leads it? And why does it matter?* By exploring these questions, the reflection process aimed to articulate how Humanities in Place is taking shape and making an impact on grantees, communities, and the broader field of philanthropic institutions—including Mellon itself.

Learning with and from grantees and colleagues has been—and is—essential, both to the reflection process, and to HiP’s broader goals. In particular, HiP not only encouraged grantees to remain

engaged throughout the reflection process, the program team also actively maintained open communication with grantees and sought their insights through surveys and interviews. In December 2022, current grantees traveled to a day-long convening held at Mellon's headquarters in New York City. The convening was an opportunity for grantees to build relationships with one another across strategy areas and geographies, strengthen connections between grantees and the HiP team, and explore key questions and ideas that emerged as Mellon's commitments are translated into new communal spaces, new programs, and new dialogues.

We have only begun to realize the full potential of Humanities in Place, not only as a grantmaking area within Mellon, but also as an evolving community and field of practice.

Part III

The Work Ahead

“To our grantees, to their communities, and to all who are listening, we say: your stories matter. Your homes, heritage, and hopes matter. And so does your future.”

Dr. Elizabeth Alexander

President, Mellon Foundation

The work of Humanities in Place necessarily continues to evolve, as the program develops and adopts an emerging set of best practices and responds to the needs of grantees and their communities. Four years in from program launch, many HiP grantees grapple with a shared set of cultural, institutional, political, operational, and environmental challenges.

Many of our grantees face policies and preservation standards that discount or devalue their heritage and stories. The first federal guidelines for historic preservation included rules that mandated the preservation of architecturally “significant” buildings, leaving essential places that were vital to documenting the history of BIPOC communities—from slave quarters to the most vibrant cultural spaces of the Harlem Renaissance—vulnerable to time, bulldozers, and climate change. The lack of value the majority culture assigned to these spaces also limited traditional funding opportunities, leading to decades of unaddressed deterioration. Many of these neglected and under-resourced sites are crumbling faster than institutions and organizations have the capacity to address. Even as many in the philanthropic field—including

Mellon—take steps to address institutionalized racial biases within grantmaking practices, funding inequities persist for organizations and leaders of color.

The urgency of this need is exacerbated by ongoing environmental and health threats. Across the country and the world, climate change disproportionately affects BIPOC communities and endangers the places HiP’s grantees are fighting so hard to preserve and re-energize. Irreplaceable sites are being endangered by wildfires, flooding, and other intense weather events. The COVID-19 pandemic, which took the lives of so many from the communities Mellon supports, served as another potent reminder that vulnerability and tragedy are unequally distributed—and that the riches of many living, breathing cultures are severely endangered.

As a generation of knowledge-makers and practitioners retires or passes, organizations must grapple with succession planning and long-term organizational sustainability. Many HiP grantees reported having difficulty recruiting the next generation of leaders and retaining and developing staff. Specifically, HiP grantees shared that while their passion for the work—and that of staff and volunteers—remains strong, the realities of managing the emotional labor involved in leading these efforts can accelerate burnout. Ensuring that organizations are positioned to nurture frontline staff and volunteers and create the systems needed to pass down vital institutional knowledge is top of mind as HiP grantees consider how to sustain their organizations during and after the grant period.

In centering social justice, HiP grantees face vicious cultural and political backlash, as controversy ignites over even the most basic statements of human rights. From state- and federal-level attempts to ban critical race theory and other educational texts, to nativist immigration policies, to the rise in hate crimes, evidence abounds of what Langston Hughes called “mean old backlash blues.” HiP grantees reported grappling with local opposition and misinformation that impacts their ability to attract funding, necessary permitting, and other approvals needed to advance the work. Given the resurgence and rising threats of racism, homophobia, and xenophobia, our grantees are understandably worried. Though no HiP grantee has reported experiencing race- or identity-based violence directed at their project, they are increasingly concerned about the possibility of physical harm coming to staff, volunteers, visitors, and the sites themselves. These social and political realities threaten the hard-earned march toward freedom that so many of our grantees led and now champion.

Against these cultural, environmental, and political headwinds, stories of place, power, and identity are more vital than ever. Humanities in Place remains committed to centering our grantees' visions and efforts while channeling this momentum into a broader movement. Humanities in Place already employs several practices that grantees pointed to as making them feel “nurtured and affirmed” during the proposal process. One of those practices involves providing consultant support throughout various stages of the proposal process, including concept note development and proposal development. Humanities in Place also hosts meetings with potential grantees who have been invited to submit a full proposal to review the information and answer questions about the proposal process. Grantees highlighted this practice as being especially helpful, since many HiP partners are first-time Mellon grantees, and, in some cases, first-time grantees of any legacy foundation. These meetings help to demystify the process and provide opportunities to foster trusting relationships between the program and grantees.

As the work of our grantees continues to evolve, so too must Humanities in Place. The program continues to adapt Foundation practices to better meet grantees where they are and to foster stronger relationships between the program and the organizations and practitioners whose work HiP is designed to support.

In the face of growing threats to heritage preservation and broad-scale cultural reckoning, the broader field of practitioners must also grow and expand our approaches to place, history, community, and justice. For Mellon and other legacy philanthropic institutions, this means dedicating the resources to expand public understanding and practice of place-based work. We must support the spaces that reflect, honor, and celebrate our shared heritage; the spaces where cultures flourish, and where all visitors are called into honest account.

Most importantly, this work supports the communities who are teaching, singing, painting, building, and shaping more just communities. As grant recipient Marija Abney of [The Soapbox Presents](#) reminds us: “Community is not where you live, community is what you do.” A New York-based celebration of artists of color, Soapbox Presents hosts community activations, energizing local spaces with music, spoken word, and dance.

Humanities in Place heeds this call: not just to *act*, but also to *activate*. Activate communities around the shared work of place. Activate culture through shared heritage and stories. And activate hope through a shared vision of liberation.

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