

## Arts Engagement for Healing and Transformation in Mission Hill, 2009–2023.

### Overview

In 2009 I become involved with various arts initiatives in Mission Hill, a 3/4 square mile (2 square km) Boston neighborhood

In 1989 Charles “Chuck” Stuart murdered his pregnant wife, Carol, in Mission Hill. Stuart then falsely alleged that an African-American assailant shot and killed Carol. Stuart’s brother confessed to police that Stuart killed his wife to collect life insurance, and Stuart subsequently died by suicide.

In choosing Mission Hill for a staged murder, Charles Stuart viewed the community as an easily stereotyped “ghetto.” The Boston Police fell for it, cracking down on the neighborhood, interrogating black men and boys, and falsely accusing Willie Bennett, who was innocent. For over 30 years this community has strived to heal from this trauma and injustice.

In 1990, in response to the initial tragedy, the Mission Hill community assembled a community-wide initiative to promote healing and goodwill in the aftermath of the Stuart case. These efforts culminated in “Mission Hill in Harmony,” a concert at The Basilica and Shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, a Roman Catholic Basilica in Mission Hill, sometimes known as “The Mission Church.”

In 2010, twenty years after the “Mission Hill in Harmony” concert, community members launched a “Harmony on the Hill” Community Initiative, which included a year-long program of workshops, training, and events to commemorate and continue healing on the anniversary of the atrocity. In particular, I am interested in investigating music’s role in this healing process.

In 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced performing artists off the stage, Mission Hill residents again assembled and healed through music—this time by launching an outdoor music and arts festival. This outdoor summer music festival, now known as the Mission Hill Arts Festival, is entering its third season.



(Above) Friday, January 5, 1990 issue of The Boston Herald

(Right) Performance at the 2023 Mission Hill Arts Festival





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### Harmony on the Hill Community Initiative, 2009–2010.

In October of 2009, I was contacted by Mission Hill community leaders and activists Ron Bell and Jim Farrow. When I met with Bell and Farrow, they asked if I would be willing to provide pro-bono design services as they sought to develop a fundraising campaign for a 20th-anniversary Mission Hill Harmony Concert. Earlier that year, I had designed and donated a silkscreen poster for a neighborhood gathering in Mission Hill’s Sheehy Park.

Bell and Farrow had likely seen this community-oriented graphic design work earlier that summer. Bell, a longtime Mission Hill community activist, was working as a special advisor to then Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick.

The concert was announced on October 23, 2009, in front of the Tobin Center by Ron Bell. The Harmony on the Hill Concert was held Sept 30, 2010, in the Mission Church (20 years after the Mission Hill in Harmony concert).

In July of 2010, using a community-engaged co-design process, I developed a series of identity concepts to support these initiatives. According to the organizers, the Harmony on the Hill Community Initiative and the supporting events “ represent[ed] a substantial effort to address the state of race relations and racism in the Mission Hill community and surrounding neighborhoods.”

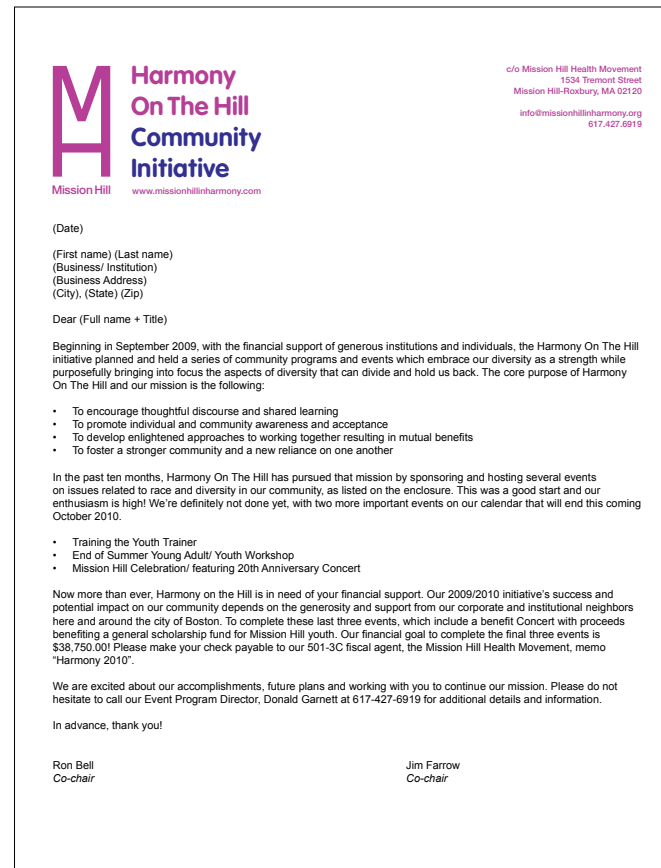
#### Credits—

- Ron Bell & Jim Farrow, Co-chairs
- Marta Rivera, Organizer
- Donald Garnett, Organizer
- Barbara Peterson-Quartier, Communications
- Dan Vlahos, Designer

#### Press—

Rocheleau, M. (2010), *Mission Hill to remember how it mended after Charles Stuart case*, boston.com, October 15.

Rocheleau, M. (2010), *Applications accepted for scholarship in memory of victim in Stuart case*, boston.com, September 6.



Fundraising letter




Mission Hill Community leader Ron Bell with then Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick and President Barack Obama.



Mission Hill Community leader Ron Bell leading a Harmony on the Hill panel discussion at the Tobin Community Center in Mission Hill (October, 25 2009).



Using similar geometry at the Mission Hill church the MH monogram abstractly resembles and pays homage to the most prominent landmark in Mission Hill.



**2009/2010 Milestones**

**October 2009**  
**Community Initiative Kick-Off**

20 years after the murder of Carol DiMaiti Stuart, Harmony On the Hill presented the A&E City Confidential documentary, *Betrayal in Beantown*, followed by a video clip featuring the personal stories of local residents and a panel discussion with audience participation.

**January and February 2010**  
**Community Conversation**

A series of smaller gatherings and house meetings throughout the Mission Hill neighborhood to begin the dialogue on race and diversity. These gatherings allowed Harmony On The Hill to identify the needs and interests of the residents, new and old, in order to determine what future events would be important to our community.

**March 2010**  
**Training the Trainer**

A workshop designed and led by Visions Inc., to engage and constructively train Harmony On The Hill leadership and community volunteers, which focused on increasing our awareness of our own issues and sensitivity toward others' positions on race.

Participants were shown how to prepare and help facilitate productive group discussions around issues of race, class, gender, age and community pride.

**April 2010**  
**Race & Diversity Workshop**

An in-depth and enlightening community workshop, presented by HOTH and Visions Inc., on race and diversity utilizing skills learned at the Training the Trainer workshop. Harmony On The Hill and neighborhood volunteers facilitated and led smaller group discussions. Attendees were encouraged to speak openly and honestly, to listen with care to each other and contribute their ideas for future programs.

Fundraising insert



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### Mission Hill Arts Festival, 2021–2023.

Can an arts festival help bring a diverse community together? In May of 2021, the Boston-based arts organizer/activist Luisa Harris approached Dan Vlahos Design with, what was at the time just the seed of an idea—the possibility of developing, promoting and organizing a newly formed arts festival in Boston’s Mission Hill neighborhood. Harris asked Dan Vlahos Design to create an identity and comprehensive visual branding toolkit for the Festival. Now in its third year, the Mission Hill Arts Festival and the visual identity developed to support it serve to expand the reach and caliber of this urban outdoor arts festival.

Harris promoted the event through social media and with posters, flyers, stickers, and banners placed around the neighborhood. The final identity and branding concepts use graphic abstraction, vivid colors and international typography to communicate/maintain the sense of a community-based festival.

The debut season of the Arts Festival was highly successful and featured both musical and visual arts components many of which sold out. As this highly diverse and densely settled urban neighborhood began to reemerge after the COVID-19 pandemic, the arts festival added a necessary diversion and outdoor arts destination. Moreover, by making Mission Hill a cultural destination the festival has become a point of pride for new and long-time residents alike.

#### Credits—

Luisa Harris, Organizer/Promoter  
 Felicia Fishel, Junior Designer (2021)  
 Jeff LoPiloto, Junior Designer (2021)  
 Mark Gonzalez, Junior Designer (2023)  
 Dan Vlahos, Design Director (2021–2023)

#### Recognition—

Group Exhibition (Juried), MassArt x SoWa 2022 Design Biennial, Nov 2022–Jan 2023, Boston, MA

#### Select Press—

Debut Mission Hill Arts Festival inspired attendees to value the work of local artists, *The Boston Scope*, 2021.



2021 Poster



2022 Poster



2023 Poster



*The 2023 festival was grant funded and concluded with the debut of “PULSE,” a new work by pianist and Composer Kevin Harris. PULSE is a chamber work combining improvised and fully notated music developed in collaboration with the Winsor Music ensemble. The project was made possible in part by a Live Arts Boston grant from The Boston Foundation. Harris and “the Winsorians” performed PULSE before a sold-out crowd of local, regional, and even national attendees.*



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**Mission Hill: Presence, Absence and Transformation, 2019.**

Can community-based photography alter or contribute to or help redefine the narrative of a community? *Mission Hill: Presence, Absence and Transformation* served as the exhibition catalogue for the 2019 community-based photography exhibition of the same name. The photography project was led by Dragan Grujic, the founder of Boston-based INFocus Camera Club. The exhibition opened in June of 2019 and was presented in two galleries located in Boston’s Brigham Circle.

As curator of the exhibition, Grujic assembled a group of local photographers—charging them to see and capture a diverse community that has been undergoing and grappling with dynamic change to its environment, identity, and population for years. As contributing photographer Chris Lovett states in the Forward, “To see Mission Hill is to look beyond the surface, to overlays of space and time, sign and signified, presence and absence.”

Now in its second printing, this 50-page, limited-edition volume showcases various works from the exhibition and includes brief statements from all five contributors. The hard-bound book is printed on acid-free premium matte paper and features an image-wrap cover. Dan Vlahos served as the book designer but was also one of the contributing photographers with the inclusion of his Just Numbers photographic series.

In June of 2022, *Mission Hill: Presence, Absence and Transformation* was entered into the permanent collection of the Boston Public Library. A copy is also housed in special collections within the Tolle Lege Collection at Merrimack College. Copies of the second edition can be purchased through Mission Hill Main Streets.

Credits—

Contributing Photographers: Dragan Grujic, Kay Mathew, Christopher Lovett, Doina Iliescu, Dan Vlahos

Book Design: Dan Vlahos

Publisher: INFocus



*(Above) Exhibition opening on June 28, 2019*

*(Top and bottom right) Mission Hill: Presence, Absence and Transformation, 2019. Limited edition photobook.*

*(Bottom left) Dan Vlahos, book signing at the MFA Boston, May 30, 2022.*





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### Healing Through Harmony: The Healing of an Urban Community Through Music, 2023.

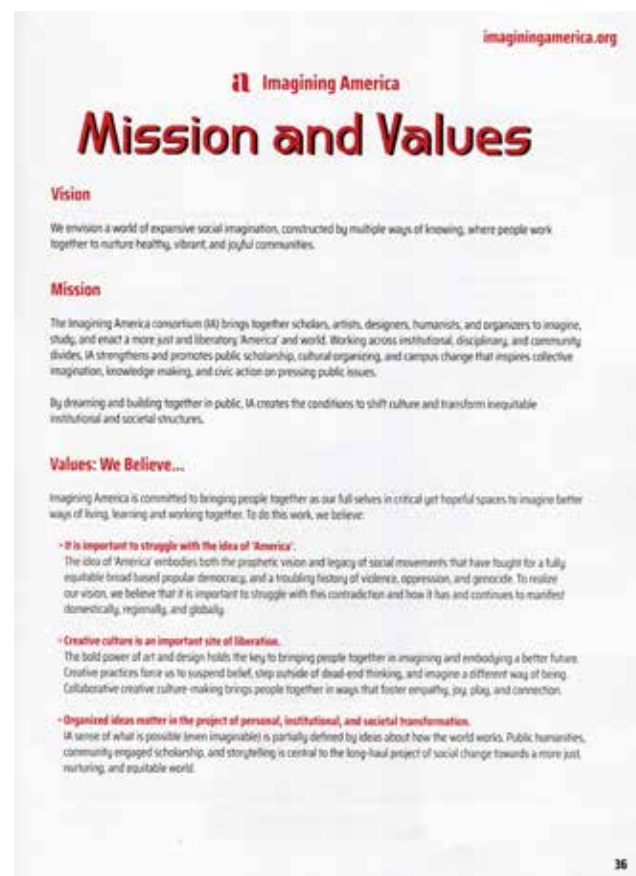
On October 22, 2023 I presented alongside community leader and activist Ron Bell at the 2023 Imagining America National Gathering in Providence, RI. Our talk was titled “Healing Through Harmony: The Healing of an Urban Community Through Music.” The theme of the 2023 conference was “Radical Reckoning: Invoking the Elements for Collective Change.”

In our talk we shared an overview of the Stuart case in Mission Hill, and how those who lived in this community were deeply and irreparably affected and harmed in the aftermath of this racist tragedy. Our talk equally focused on the healing and unification efforts that followed. For the first time ever, this talk traced and documented these cultural histories and began a process of accessing the impact of these healing efforts and how they have furthermore shaped the community.

The conference program catalog stated that, “Reckoning is the practice of taking full account. It requires digging down to the roots—to be radical. While radical reckoning may unearth uncomfortable truths, past harms, and the origins of ongoing injustices, it also reveals the foundations of enduring cultural heritage, creative ecological adaptation, and the sources of physical and spiritual sustenance.”

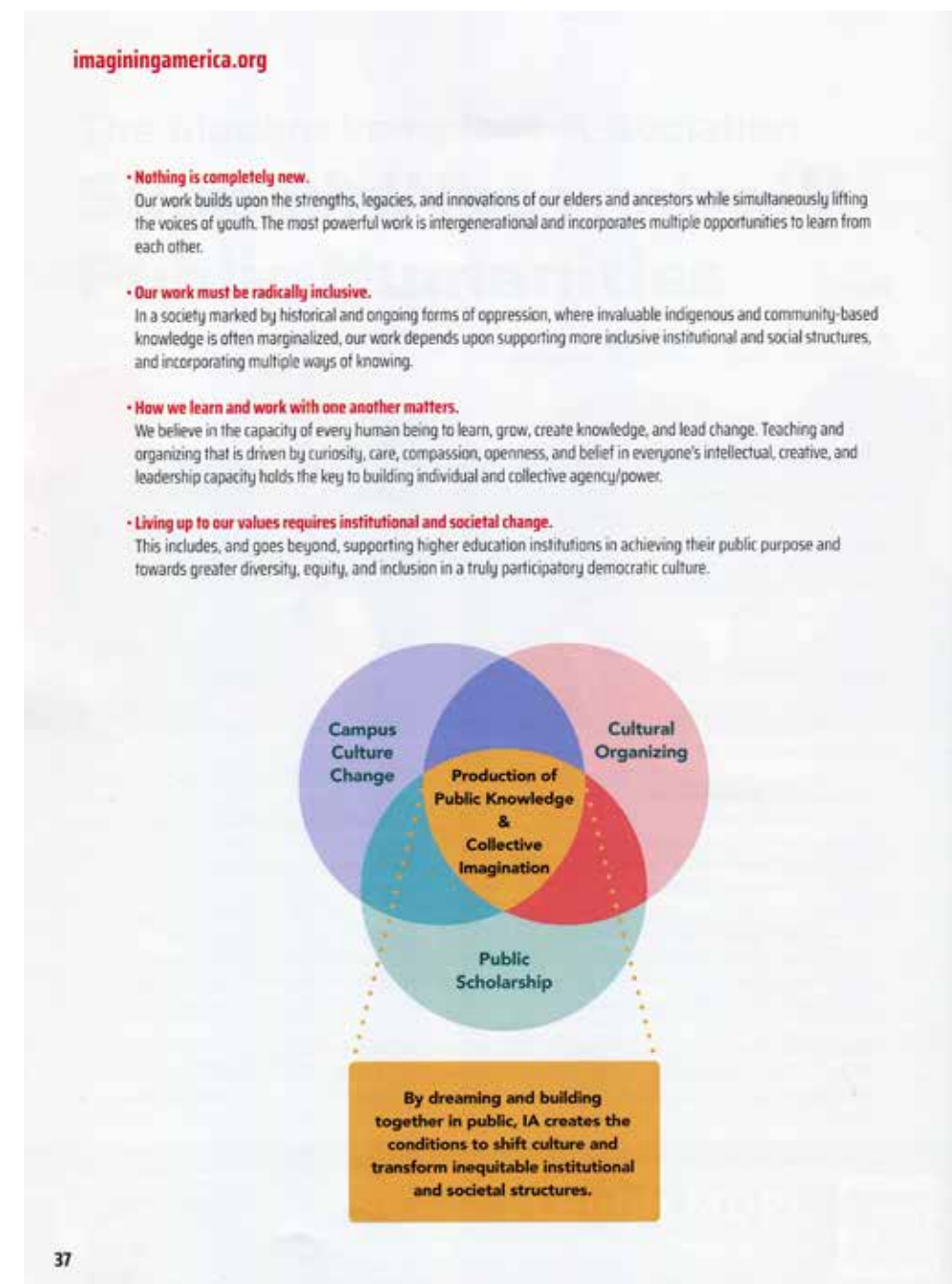
The organizers go on to say “Taking full account is necessary to bring about lasting change in ourselves, our communities, and our institutions.” In this spirit, Bell and I first met and began collaborating over ten years ago in 2009—and now over 10 years later we have continued collaborating and telling the story.

Notably, 2009 was also the first year I began teaching (at MassArt). Even as far back as 1990, scholars such as Ernest Boyer in *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* stated, “the most important obligation now confronting the nation’s colleges and universities is to break out of the tired old teaching versus research debate and define, in more *creative* [emphasis added] ways, what it means to be a scholar. It’s time to recognize the full range of faculty talent and the great diversity of functions higher education must perform” (p. xii). For years this small but impactful portion of my design research has [I hope] responded to this call.



(Top Row) Slides from October 22nd talk “Healing Through Harmony: The Healing of an Urban Community Through Music” presented at the 2023 Imagining America National Gathering.

(Bottom) Pages 36–37 of the 2023 Imagining America National Gathering Program.





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**Mission Hill and the Legacy of the Charles Stuart Case, Public Forum and Panel Discussion, 2023.**

On November 18, 2023, Adrian Walker, Associate Editor at *The Boston Globe* convened a moderated discussion around the legacy and impacts of the Charles Stuart case. The discussion took place at Mission Hill’s Tobin Community Center. *The Boston Globe* also brought a staffed mobile sound editing booth for community members to share their stories.

For over two years, reporters at *The Boston Globe* have been re-investigating the Stuart case, talking to hundreds of people, and digging up documents and recordings that have never been seen or heard before. As was stated on the flier that promoted the forum to the community, “Thirty-four years ago may feel like ancient history, but the impact of the case is still deeply felt—and this podcast changes the narrative around a story long cemented in Boston’s lore.” Following the panel discussion attendees listed to, “Speak Upon It” a track by legendary Boston hip-hop artist Ed O.G. (Edward Anderson) from his 1991 album *Life of a Kid in The Ghetto*.

On December 4, 2023 HBO will be releasing an original three-part series *Murder in Boston: Roots, Rampage & Reckoning*. Produced and directed by Jason Hehir (“The Last Dance,” HBO’s “Andre The Giant”), and produced in association with *The Boston Globe*. The series will explore this polarizing 1989 event by “braiding extensive archive coverage of the incident, the years leading up to it, and its aftermath, with more than a dozen present-day interviews of people affected at the time including residents, community members, journalists who covered the case” (HBO).

Moderator and Panelists—

- Adrian Walker, Associate Editor, The Boston Globe
- Ron Bell, Former Director, Tobin Community Center
- Ted Landsmark, Attorney and Civil Rights Activist
- Diane Wilkerson, Civil Rights Activist and Former State Senator

References—

Warner Bros. Discovery Pressroom (2023). *HBO Original Three-Part Documentary Series “Murder in Boston: Roots, Rampage & Reckoning” Debuts December 4*. <https://press.wbd.com/us/media-release/hbo-o/hbo-original-three-part-documentary-series-murder-boston-roots-rampage-and-reckoning>



(Top) Flier promoting the November 18, 2023 panel discussion at the Tobin Center.

(Bottom) Page on the Boston Globe promoting the forthcoming investigative report.



(Top) Ted Landsmark and Ron Bell during the panel discussion at the Tobin.

(Bottom: Left to Right) Adrian Walker, Diane Wilkerson, Ted Landsmark and Ron Bell



(Bottom Right) Ron Bell and Dan Vlahos in discussion at the November 18th event at the Tobin Center.