

Connecting to the Archive: Counter-gentrification Tactics in Central Brooklyn

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Weeksville was founded in 1838 by formerly enslaved persons and freedmen who sought to create a self-sustaining utopian community in Brooklyn, New York. Distinguished by its urbanity, size, and relative physical and economic stability, the community provided sanctuary for self-emancipated persons from Southern slave plantations, and for free Black people escaping the violence of New York City's Draft Riots in 1863. The second largest African American community in the U.S. was absorbed by the forces of real estate development in New York City. After almost fifty years of community led persistence and vision, in 2014 the Weeksville Heritage Center (WHC) introduced a new Cultural Arts Building and interpretive landscape on the same campus as the original community. "Connecting to the Archive: Counter-Gentrification Tactics in Central Brooklyn," strengthens community development activities as a counterforce to gentrification through several processes that center around the ongoing development of archival and oral history collections held by the Center. Through academic partnership with Pratt Institute in the Pratt Weeksville Archive students and faculty work together with the Center's staff and community members on the ongoing archiving project, which seeks to support the Center's efforts to preserve and add to the archive, provide access to, and interpret the archival microhistory of community development and documentation activities that led to the formation of the Society and its growth. Historic Black nineteenth century self-supporting communities can become a model for empowerment in twenty first century shrinking Black communities rendered apolitical and ahistorical and little hope for a future. Central Brooklyn is arguably the largest African American community in the U.S., with a population that is shrinking in numbers due to white gentrification and beset by the traumas caused by anti-Black racism, generational displacement and poor access to public services. To assist in this effort, the project engages with local residents in oral history and critical ethnography practices so as to decentered the privileged position of the ethnographer. Based on the multidimensional method of Edgar Morin and everyday life practitioners, the goal is to empower residents

to utilize the archive through interviewing, self-documentation, storytelling, and appreciation of archival and oral history methodologies. The project connects the Center to its immediate community and the immediate community to the Center through the effort to document the memory and experience of the neighborhood in the past, present, and future, to engage with and expand the archival collections held at the Center so as to create a place of refuge, delight and individual and collective history as a counterforce to the forces of global neoliberalism that continue to degrade, marginalize and challenge BIPOC community building.

INTRODUCTION

If the African American experience emerges from the structure of slavery, what does an architecture whose main purpose is to fortify the state have to say to that experience?¹ While Vitruvius' directive on architecture's role in fortifying the state may seem to apply to an earlier era, the much more recent expansion of public housing, the 'school to prison pipeline,' and prison-industrial complex (the latter resulting from the so-called war on drugs), and neighborhood gentrification today challenge architecture to examine its role in fortifying the state; At a time of a renewal of violence toward people of color and an emerging aesthetics that privileges Blackness as a politics of transformation, African American space is a world making and shaping aesthetic and political operation that foregrounds the creative output of African American people in the wake of state and extra state oppression. At the core of African American space is a political form of experience which can be expressed on sites that are appropriated from the status quo, resulting in destinations of refuge, delight and joy. This paper presents the Pratt Weeksville Archive, a collaboration of Pratt Institute and the Weeksville Heritage Center. It argues that an archive that develops transhistorically can be an agent of empowerment in community development and architectural pedagogy. The archive is positioned to be active and operative, an agent of resistance but also initiative At the same time as it is beneficial to the pedagogy of the studio, the Pratt Weeksville Archive serves to symbiotically connect the Pratt Institute with its community partners in central Brooklyn, the largest, and, arguably, oldest, African American enclave in the U.S.



Figure 1. Connecting to the Archive Collage Poster showing the urban footprint of current day Weeksville, the Weeksville Heritage Center and a historic photo of Bethel AME congregation from the 1920's. by Scott Ruff.

Although generally associated with the southern U.S., slavery was legal in New York State for over two hundred years, and slave ownership in the state was only surpassed in number by South Carolina. When slavery was outlawed in New York State in 1827, a period of racial persecution led to the formation of self-supporting Black communities to mitigate the effects of anti-Black racism. Weeksville was founded in 1838 by formerly enslaved persons and freed persons in Brooklyn, New York who wanted to own land so they could vote in elections; only male property owners could vote in New York State at that time. Distinguished by its urbanity, size, and relative physical and

economic stability, Weeksville provided sanctuary for self-emancipated persons from Southern slave plantations, and for free Black people escaping the violence of New York City's Draft Riots in 1863. In its heyday, the community supported at least seven Black institutions, including The Freedman's Torch, an African American newspaper-cum-textbook since enslaved Africans were prohibited from learning how to read. The second largest African American community in the U.S. was absorbed by the forces of anti-Black racism that undergird real estate development in New York City.² Collective memory has kept this history alive, and has also driven the effort to sustain Weeksville's legacy

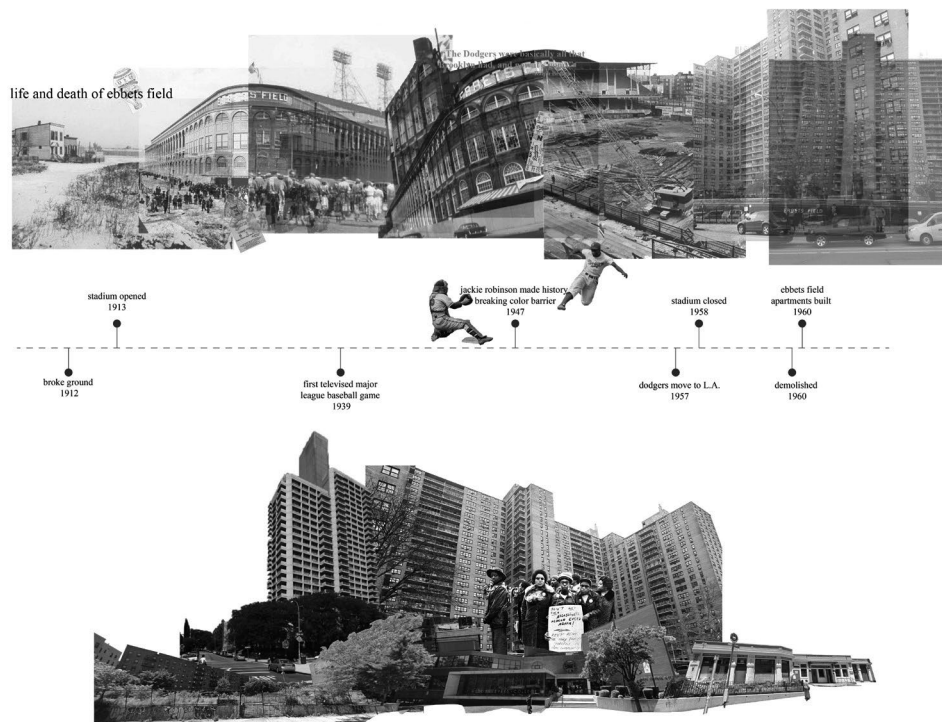


Figure 2. Life and Death of Ebbets. by Beren Saraques and Cameron Clark .

to evolve its narrative in a new era. After almost fifty years of community led persistence and vision, in 2014 the Weeksville Heritage Center opened on the original footprint of the historic campus to preserve the history and provide an exhibition space and interpretive landscape.

“Connecting to the Archive of Weeksville: Countergentrification Tactics in Central Brooklyn,” envisions opportunities in community development activities by opening the archive of the historic Weeksville to locate the collective memory among existing community members and students in a school of architecture. Historic Black nineteenth century self-supporting communities provide a model of empowerment for twenty first century Black communities. Although Central Brooklyn is the largest African American communities in the U.S., its population is shrinking in numbers due to the trauma of displacement that Mindy Fullilove characterizes as “root shock,” “the crippling effect of decades of disinvestment in communities of color and the urban renewal practices that destroyed those communities.”³ Neighborhood gentrification, resulting in the forced displacement of people who have become apolitical (lacking a sense of place), ahistorical (lacking a sense of the past) and afuturistic (lacking a sense of purpose), leads to the further destruction of a historic Black community for affluent new residents who lack the appreciation of the community.

The Black ghetto in the U.S. has developed over many generations due in large part to the enforcement of legal and extra legal segregation and limited housing opportunities for people of color. Out of this necessity has emerged a vibrant community

that centers around mutual aid, refuge, joy and delight in the face of anti-Black racism; it has been disintegrating since the 1970s.⁴ Looking to create a new commons in central Brooklyn to celebrate African American space in an expanded archive, the project takes its inspiration from Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons Fugitive Planning and Black Study*: “Our task is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler’s armed incursion. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common—the general and generative antagonism—from within the surround.”⁵

METHODOLOGY

For the most part, architecture has been employed to contain, regulate, limit, survey, punish and erase the Black and Brown person, which is why the African American experience of space has remained largely outside of architecture. The archive project seeks African American space from many critical vantages to provide a fractal like experience of space expanding and growing from different directions in the past, present and future by incorporating collage and superimposition in the design process. It is our desire to provide African American space with a dimension and breadth in visual form to match the discourse in subjectivity that theorists have brought to the study of the aftermath of slavery on a topic of pressing personal and collective interest in a period of heightened sensitivity for the condition of the commons. Until recently, the study of African American space has remained in the periphery of architectural discourse, which is extraordinary considering that the African American experience of slavery is a significant material practice.

The methodology is to incorporate the qualities of African American space in a design project that serves a broader community; the methodology works in three parts: the project, the archive and the community, each operating simultaneously in different time frames. In rethinking the Black archive, we looked to African American subjectivity as a practice of “performances of opposition,” that takes place in the “cut, remembrance and redress where the performance of the object meets the performance of humanity.”⁶ In The Black Panther Party for Self Defense we found an example of a self-supporting community that introduced pride in Black history and a solution for food scarcity and Black autonomy. Weeksville was founded by formerly enslaved and freed Black persons and white allies who wanted to own property so they could vote and protect their interests. It was located on a Lenape trail that was appropriated by Dutch and English colonists although, in its meandering off-grid path, still retains a relationship to the watery streams of central Brooklyn and to Sheepshead Bay. For students learning to consider the commons from within African American space in central Brooklyn we created a genealogy of texts showing the ways in which the community has emerged from an Indigenous African and Native for a living archive that is recreating a narrative of central Brooklyn as a nexus of cultures that can inform design projects to support a new common in the surround of resurgent anti-Black racism.

Taken together, the Weeksville archive provides a span of historical record, personal experience and collective memory of a Black community in central Brooklyn in the shadow of a significant nineteenth-century community. In richly narrated personal anecdotes, the accounts in the interviews that we conduct capture the everyday life of a tightly knit, self-organizing community that survives the effects of mounting anti-Black racism compounded by the Covid-19 Pandemic. They reveal the value of a series of events that are conducted throughout each week and year to hold the community together, of the role of delivering and maintaining social services, such as food pantries, outreach for the elderly, voting registration, self-supporting community gardens, and combatting gun violence to protect the young.

For students designing projects that engage directly with the issues of community development in central Brooklyn, the archive provides a resource of everyday practices in agriculture and mutual aid that can be traced to the record of the historic Weeksville. The fifteen week design studio that attempts to engage in community development with an oral history component is complicated by the logistics of oral history and critical ethnography, which require reflective time, and the work of the fast paced design studio: due to the rushed nature of the interviews conducted in such a constrained setting the subjects often feel exploited by an institution that they already see as exploitative. With the archive, students can access pre-existing interviews and reach out to prospective subjects for clarification of statements in the public domain. The community participants in the oral history archive are invited to attend the studio reviews

and to participate in the community of the school. One of the interview subjects who grew up in the shadow of the school commented that he never thought of the school as interested in him or in his life until he began to participate in the archive. The archive and the studio are part of an ongoing effort to decolonize the curriculum undertaken as participants in the Diversity and Equity Initiative in the Dean’s office in the Pratt School of Architecture. An ongoing archive to build and draw on for design studios encourages engagement for the students in the common as citizens and expands the value of their education.

For students accustomed to the abstraction of maps, plans and sections, the archive presents an affective experience in a community that they are studying from a calculated distance. In contrast to the rectilinear organization of the logics of architectural representation, the interviews provide critical insight into a culture that is supported through a rhizome of relationships that become apparent in the telling of the overlapping stories spanning decades. The effects of redlining, urban renewal and the failed revolutionary events of the late 1960s, led to a reduction in city services, compelling several of the interview subjects to relocate outside of the historic Black community that had sustained their families for several generations. The Black community draws them to Brooklyn each week to continue a bond with the historic community of Weeksville. Ronald Johnson, the church historian of the Bethel AME Tabernacle Church, reports that he doesn’t mind the commute from the adjacent borough of Queens. He speaks affectionately of the warmth, joy, and safety of the fellowship that meets regularly throughout the week in the church sanctuary, a utilitarian vernacular structure of the middle of the twentieth century, which is dignified by the warmth and safety that it provides to the congregation.⁷

The archive and studio began in 2020-2021 at the height of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The interviews concentrated on the congregation of the Bethel AME Tabernacle Church, which has played a central role in the Weeksville community since its founding. The student centered interviews provide an experience that benefits community members through intergenerational conversations. The methodology fuses oral history and critical ethnography by conducting interviews that privilege both a historical timeline and the formation of African American space as a culture. The public-facing workshops allowed church members to create accessible historical records to strengthen the community.

To decenter the privileged position of the ethnographer, interview subjects are encouraged to ask questions and follow up sessions demonstrate how the archive operates, and how they can access and add to the archive themselves. In this way, the process of conducting and processing the interviews is open to the community. Students and faculty participate in community events, such as street fairs, that activate African American space in the cut, remembrance and redress.

The studio locates experimental formal operations for an architecture that is responsive to African American space as a practice of cultural engagement. The studio seeks to connect to the living archive of a self-supporting community for imagined and speculative futures on sites in central Brooklyn that encourage new programs to provide a counterforce to neighborhood gentrification. As such, the studio engages in a discursive exchange in the first weeks to provide space for discussions of topics ranging from the afterlife of slavery to carceral aesthetics that encourage the sharing of lived experiences and interpretations of the historical record. Exploring the site in tandem with the research to incorporate cultural engagement in a historiography of African American space, we pair Mindy Thompson Fullilove's *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It* with Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City* to interrogate the foundational text in urban mapping from a decolonial perspective and introduce the theory of root shock through displacement in the analysis of the sites. Students note the sites of displacement in their mapped areas (ie, NYCHA housing blocks, vacant lots, warehoused housing) and create a glossary of terms that they use to describe the effects of root shock in their mapping operations.

Research reveals a number of material sources from which an understanding of African American space can be based, such as fishing, woodwork, brickmaking, tabby, music, basket weaving, quilt making, spirituality, and Black Radical politics--which each student pairing studied and analyzed as a chosen artifact or process. Through the understating of its scale, dimensions and tectonics, the artifact or process was translated to understand its structure, composition, modes of assembly/disassembly, components, materials, and relation with the body in an analysis of time based processes and the structure of the form of narratives emerging from African American space. The emphasis of the project is placed on translating the artifact/process of analysis into a performative and composite drawing to capture and distill its syntax and tectonics through various forms of experimentation that could include collage, superimposition, and automatic writing.

Within the first few weeks of the semester students introduce sites that engage urban infrastructure on scales that range between urban design and architecture in civic structures. The sites determine the design process so that at midterm they are able to present a manifesto of politics as a form of experience that they planned to respond to on a selected or composite site(s) in the final design. Included in the final are representative internal program areas and the ways these public spaces may respond to the communities. The time from midterm review to final provide an opportunity for deep development at varied scales of the project. The way they engage in the site is determined by a variety of factors that are explored in tandem with the research to incorporate cultural engagement in a historiography of African American space.

The students' contribution to the archive brings the work of their design studio research into a public domain. Referencing the historic Weeksville community allowed them to consider the value of mutual aid and self-supporting agricultural communities in an urban setting to address food scarcity and the historic intergenerational trauma of displacement due to the anti-Black biases of real estate development in New York City.

A project by Beren Saraques and Cameron Clark takes as its point of departure the removal of the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team from Brooklyn and the subsequent destruction of Ebbets Field stadium to address the effects of the trauma of displacement for Black and Brown people. As the first major league ballfield to be integrated, Ebbets field was a significant African American space that was erased and replaced by Ebbets Field Apartments, a Mitchell Lama housing complex for low income families that is located in a behemoth apartment tower casting a long shadow over the neighborhood. The underlying qualities of community warmth and safety offered to people of color who attended the baseball games when the Brooklyn Dodgers were integrated in the early 1950s are incorporated in a design for a new commons on the site of the original stadium. The framework of the housing that supplanted Ebbets Field is reimagined in a way that restores the memory of a Brooklyn where Black life was celebrated through the introduction of Jackie Robinson, a Black major league baseball player, and a Black audience, in a previously white institution.

In an Afrosurrealist gesture that emphasizes topological deformation of the figure, the project imagines an alternative reality where the Ebbets Field Apartments were never built by appropriating the space that was taken away from the Black community, and reclaiming history that has been erased. Their research questions if central Brooklyn could be restored to a community that nurtures and supports all of its residents through a network of interconnectedness that has the ability to revive the familiarity that was destroyed on the selected site seventy years ago. By reimagining another past-future for the site, the residents are now rehoused in a structure that supports their lives, interests, and abilities by highlighting the role of agriculture in the history of the African diaspora. In a gesture of hospitality for the locals and all of Brooklyn, the project reinvents the story of the community that was disrupted by the dislocation of an African American historic landmark with an agricultural commons that locates Brooklyn's future in celebrations of self-sufficiency and mutual aid.

Through growing, making, cooking, and cultivating, the center aligns with historical memory of the African diaspora to create a new intergenerational social hub. The agricultural focus of the programs brings the community back together through agricultural practices that serve as a reminder to the community of African culinary history that is found in slave gardens of the dispossessed that grew from seeds that were carried from Africa. The restorative value of the flora of the African diaspora



Figure 3. TransHistoric Surrealism Perspective Beren Saraques and Cameron Clark .

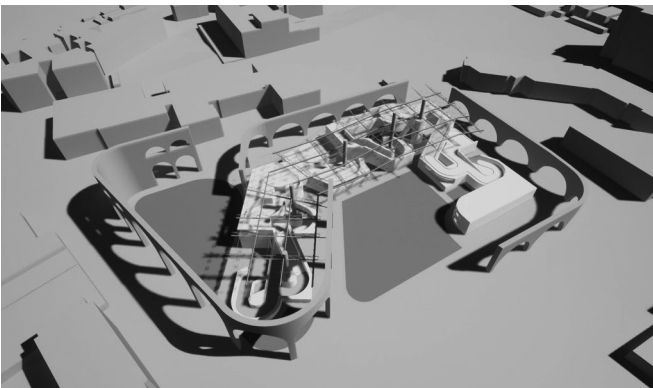


Figure 4. TransHistoric Surrealism Ariel Beren Saraques and Cameron Clark .

are the healing balms of Caribbean poets such as Aime Cesaire, Sylvia Winter, and Edouard Glissant who find spirituality in the excess of life and in the vegetation of the land where they can flourish. Instead of locked in a cramped tower with only fast food options, the residents of the ghost of Ebbets Field gather resources and learn from the community in a food common that introduces food justice programs and food education. This program can adapt and continue in the future and expand to introduce the elements of food as a counterpoint to the predominance of unhealthy fast food chain stores that currently serve people on the site.

Another project by Cierra Francillon and Caleb Joshua (CJ) Spring proposes a new future for Brownsville as it recovers from the lasting and continuing traumas of the carceral system, a system designed to prey on Black Americans by criminalizing poverty with the tacit goal of turning communities into inmate factories, leaving deep generational wounds that have been inadequately addressed. Fleeing the South's Jim Crow and increasingly violent police, Black people migrated to Brownsville in search of a better life. However, they found similar condition in the promised land of New York City; like many other migrating Black and brown people, they essentially moved to a place that had little opportunity, forcing them to build on an unstable foundation. This



Figure 5. Gardens of the Disposed Collage and Demographic studies of Brownsville NY. by Cierra Francillon and Caleb Joshua (CJ) Spring .

lack of foundation has resulted in devastating intergenerational poverty, resulting in low education and food insecurity. With the second highest incarceration rate in New York City, Brownsville is a target for the police state.

“Gardens of the Dispossessed in Brownsville,” weaves together Angela Davis’ anti-carceral theory as an identifier of the historical problem of over policing in Brownsville, the can-do pedagogy of Tuskegee University as a programmatic precedent to make architecture that houses agricultural program as a method of self-sufficiency, together with the theory of Katherine McKittrick’s “Plantation Futures,” which proposes that “The geographies of slavery, postslavery, and Black dispossession provide opportunities to notice that the right to be human carries in it a history of racial encounters and innovative Black diaspora practices that, in fact, spatialize acts of survival.”⁸

Scaffolded in this way, the project activates agriculture as not only self-sufficiency, but as a move of rebellion and resistance against the carceral system. Symbolically located on Mother Gaston Boulevard, a central axis in the community, the project pays homage to the history of Brownsville as an activist community that cares for its young and elderly. Rosetta Gaston, the founder and visionary of Brownsville Heritage House, Inc. envisioned an educational and cultural center for young and old, which would spark individual and community achievements by focusing on a common heritage. Francillon and Spring note that

Gaston realized early on that the one element missing in our community was, “the knowledge of our culture.”

The project is set up as a series of rhizomatic structures that partner with the existing context to create a campus connecting disparate elements in the current community to encourage self-sufficiency through agricultural means; it sets out to combat the white supremacist framing of Black agriculture in the context of chattel slavery, and incorporates agriculture as a form of resistance, a way of combatting the carceral system. “Gardens of the Dispossessed,” imagines “students, elders, and in between folks coming from all over NYC and the world,” to view the community as it becomes a catalyst for reversing climate change as well as abolishing the structures of white settler capitalism that have kept Black and brown people in a perpetual downward spiral of poverty, incarceration and limited life opportunities that accompany the forces of systemic racism.

CONCLUSION

The Pratt Weeksville Archive is positioned to be active and operative, an agent of resistance but also initiative. The paper (something about something) and the project (the work itself) are two separate but entwined entities. The paper conjures the limits and constraints of the project - the restrictions of this publication format and the circumscription of an academic calendar. The most important work occurs in the ‘pre-work’, the interviews, analysis and mappings, which continue throughout

the year outside of the studio, while the limits of time yield work that hints at what's to come. "Connecting to the Archive," opens the archive to community members and students who can participate in the instrumentality of historiography by operating in a nineteenth century Black community that is still relatively unknown and provides a valuable resource for an engaged design studio and a model of community development. The student projects are available to the staff of the Weeksville Heritage Center and the community partners to excite new possibilities for imagined futures. From historic documents and photographs, we can sense that the Weeksville community of the nineteenth century covered a significant amount of land in Central Brooklyn. Yet we don't have an accurate map of the community. The memory of the historic Weeksville still lives in vestigial traces among the interview subjects and the student projects. As such, the archive provides a counterforce to gentrification since it instills a sense of pride of the past among the participants and residents of a neighborhood that is marked by the trauma of root shock. As the forced displacement of people who have become apolitical, ahistorical and afuturistic, neighborhood gentrification moves quickly and quietly through communities that are unprepared for the consequences of real estate development in late state capitalism. The Pratt Weeksville Archive strengthens community development activities through several processes that center around the ongoing development of archival and oral history collections held by the Weeksville Heritage Center.

ENDNOTES

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