A Place at the Table: The Role of Historic Sites in Gentrifying Neighborhoods
Our Stories: Shaw through the 1970s

by Sarah Bordeaus


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Acknowledgments

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Abstract of Thesis

A Place at the Table: The Role of Historic Sites in Gentrifying Neighborhoods
Our Stories: Shaw through the 1970s

This thesis project challenges museums and historic sites to reexamine their function and role in transitioning or gentrifying neighborhoods. Located in the Shaw, one of DC’s oldest African American neighborhoods and most recently gentrified neighborhoods, the proposed exhibition will be the inaugural exhibition at the newly restored Carter G Woodson Historic House. It will explore life in Shaw during the 1970s through the lives of its residents. The exhibition intends to facilitate multigenerational dialogue by engaging past and present residents of the Shaw neighborhood as well as students and alumni of Howard University in active memory sharing.

Additionally, the proposal outlines research methodologies and findings in the areas of audience and community engagement, site-specific interpretation, and the role of neighborhood museums in urban centers.
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“Museums must be willing to dispense with whatever is stale and pernicious, and to replace it with functions that are relevant and socially responsive; they must also be willing to stand by their own honest efforts...”

-Emily Dennis Harvey, Museum for the People

Introduction

“Gentrification is a crime!” Dominic Mouldon of Organizing Neighborhood Equity (ONE) D.C. proclaims to a crowded Shiloh Baptist Church. The group has gathered for an Elevation DC community meeting titled, “Gentrification, Renaissance, or Revitalization.” His statement echoes with yeses and thank yous from established residents, city newcomers, and D.C. housing activists alike. The meeting addresses the rapid redevelopment of the Shaw neighborhood, one of Washington DC’s oldest African American neighborhoods. Shaw’s fluctuating past is one of its most marked characteristics going from booming and vibrant in the 20s and 30s, to being destroyed by the 1968 riots, to the crack epidemic of the 1980s that destroyed much of DC’s inner city, to the redevelopment and skyrocketing property values of today.

While there is not an exact definition of the phenomenon, gentrification is best defined by Point of View (POV), a PBS documentary program that states:

“gentrification is a general term for the arrival of wealthier people in an existing urban district, a related increase in rents and property values, and changes in the district’s character and culture. The term is often used negatively, suggesting the displacement of poor communities by rich outsiders. But the effects of gentrification are complex and contradictory, and its real impact varies. Gentrification has been the cause of painful conflict in many American cities, often along racial and economic fault lines. Neighborhood change is often viewed as a miscarriage of social justice, in which wealthy, usually white, newcomers are

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congratulated for ‘improving’ a neighborhood whose poor, minority residents are displaced by skyrocketing rents and economic change.”

You cannot talk about Washington, D.C.’s historically African American neighborhoods without addressing the issue of gentrification. It is on the news, in blog posts, and talked about in radio programming. More noticeably it is in the new condos being constructed and the new Elizabeth Taylor mural overlooking the new Beer Garden across the street from one of the country’s old Afrocentric schools, Ujamaa School, founded in 1968. It is in the businesses opening and those that are closing. Underneath it all it is the moving of people into and out of the choicest neighborhoods.

Gentrification is a complex issue, but its most contentious factor is race. The arrival of a new affluent white residency and the rapid displacement of longtime black residents is why gentrification has been added to the “do not mention” list for polite conversation, right below religion and politics. The “G” word is everywhere you look in Shaw and the tension, frustration, fear, and anger are palpable. The rapid change of Washington, DC’s oldest African American neighborhood is causing new residents to feel attacked, guilty, and misrepresented, and established residents to feel frustrated, angry, and ignored.

“The crime [of gentrification] is the erasing of civil and human rights for D.C. citizens — the erasing of history, culture and art of longtime D.C. residents.”

-Dominic Mouldon, ONE DC

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This proposal is for an exhibition titled: “Our Stories: Shaw through the 1970s” to be located at the Carter G Woodson Historic Home in Shaw. It aims to address this very issue of gentrification by preserving and revisiting the cultural heritage of the place through site-specific interpretation. In responding to the community-voiced issue of gentrification, the exhibition also challenges museums to look beyond the didactic and safe and begin to confront the issues that affect contemporary citizens in their surrounding neighborhoods.

Named for Robert Gould Shaw, Civil War commander of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment of Colored Soldiers, the history of Shaw is one steeped in the African American heritage. Known for its black-owned businesses, concentration of excellent “colored” schools during the Jim Crow era, and proximity to “Black Broadway” on U Street, the neighborhood is layered in complex and rich cultural history. In the current climate of rapid change and turnover of homes and businesses, there is a very real fear that the rich culture and history that is attracting so many new people into the neighborhood is also being lost, commodified, or ignored. In an article in Research Magazine residents reflected on the new amenities like bike lanes, dog parks, and cafes that have popped up around the neighborhood. While many are thriving businesses that bring jobs to the area, jobs that do not pay enough to actually live in Shaw, longtime residents have to ask “who are these really for? Are they for me?” Or are they for the white newcomers, reflecting white values, white culture, and white interests? Their skepticism is warranted.

Addressing the issue of gentrification is not an easy one, and, as many people in the neighborhood that I have talked to believe it is already done and the Shaw they know is already gone. But can museums, the keepers of our “things,” of our past, of our heritage, play an active role in preserving the cultural identity of a place that has become

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unfamiliar to longtime residents? Do they have a place in addressing contemporary issues affecting our urban centers where many of them reside?

In 1969, the first ever seminar on neighborhood museums was held at MUSE the Bedford Lincoln Neighborhood Museum in Brooklyn, New York. In the report of the proceedings, organizers Emily Harvey and Bernard Friedberg, state that the purpose of the publication was to “record the anger, and abrasive sense of hurt and injustice, the tensions and misconceptions that emerge in any confrontation between black and white, or any convening of the have and have-not groups.”7 The report documents the sometimes-heated debate around inner city neighborhood museums and their role, location, function, and operation within those neighborhoods.

While resolution was not found at the conference, the report shows how important it is to provide a platform for the voicing of long held frustrations. I commend Harvey and Friedberg for their commitment to recording the situation honestly and with transparency because their records prove that despite perceptions of its traditional elitism, museum professionals are also activists and champions for their communities and have a role in addressing the issues that affect them. Also, the seminar acts as precedents for this kind of bold research in a similar setting. In 2014, though museums have made great strides in audience focused and inclusive experiences,8 but museums can still benefit from challenges by their constituencies to create a variety of opportunities to discuss contemporary issues like the racial tensions that exist in our communities.

To do this museums will need to look outside themselves. Engaging urban design, public art, and city and regional planning can give heritage sites and museums a place at the table in constructing or reconstructing public life in transitioning and gentrifying

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7 Harvey, Emily Dennis, and Bernard Friedberg, eds. 1.
neighborhoods. It is essential that they embrace their unique ability to enable visitors to engage in “active remembering.” In doing this museums give a public voice to past experiences “that reestablishes history as a living legacy and opens up the thing or place to the process of iterative decoding.”9 It is in this spirit that museums, exhibitions, and historical sites in Shaw can attempt to address and provide, as National Museum of the American Indian founding director Richard West states, “a safe space for unsafe ideas.”10

**Overview of Exhibition:**

This proposal is for the inaugural exhibition located in the newly restored Carter G Woodson Historic House. This exhibition will set the tone for the historic site, currently under construction and operating under the National Park Service. It will respond to the community voiced issue of gentrification, through an interactive and multidimensional exploration of Shaw’s history. The exhibition will specifically tell stories of Shaw residents in the 1970s of varying ages and backgrounds and expand on how we show a historical narrative and more specifically how museums interact with surrounding neighborhoods through narrative, interpretation, and purpose.

The exhibition encompasses three major goals:

1. to recognize and preserve the rich history of an African American urban community that is experiencing rapid growth and changing demographics.

2. establishes the Carter G Woodson Historic House as a space for past and current residents to tell their stories, be heard, and valued by the next generation making museums active participants in their community and responsive to contemporary concerns.

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3. through a layered and multidimensional approach the exhibition challenges the ideas of what it means to tell a historical narrative in a museum in a historic site and addresses why these institutions, while claiming inclusion, often fall short of engaging a more diverse audiences in terms of ethnicity, income, and age.

The exhibition will be a multi-sensory experience that will immerse people in the stories of residents of Shaw in the 1970s. Drawing from mediums of site-specific interpretation, local businesses that are established in the neighborhood as gathering places, museum theory, historic homes, and traditional African American history and culture museums, a new type of historical exhibit will take form. It will be one that engages in site-specific interpretation in the context of individuals, a home, and a neighborhood. The space will create a community center where conversations about the past can explore not only cultural and political expressions, but also raise questions about the legacy of past and the neighborhood’s future.

On a more macro level the exhibition narrative will investigate themes of identity, power, memory, and community through the lives of the residents being represented. At the same time it will recognize individuality and the nuances of a community to contribute to a richer experience. Exploring each resident’s unique and personal story will highlight historical education institutions like Howard University and the Ujamaa School, long established neighborhood churches and the role of those churches in the community and home, local politics that reflected the national movement toward integrated political power, long established businesses that may or may not still exist today, and musical expression and popular culture. Creating this space will connect the National Park Service and the Carter G Woodson Historic House to its neighborhood in a dynamic and relevant way.
Overview of Site:

Carter G Woodson, son of former slaves and graduate from Harvard University was the “Father of Black History.” He founded the Association for the Study of African American Life and History in his home in 1915. Woodson lived at 1538 9th St NW, from 1915 until his death in 1950 and was an active member of the Shaw and the District’s African American communities. One woman I spoke with who spent her childhood in Shaw said she still remembers “Mr. Woodson” walking up and down 9th St, stopping to talk to family, neighbors, friends. Such a historic residence provides the perfect location for a neighborhood focused history exhibition.

Currently being renovated after 40 years of neglect, the National Park Service plans to recreate Woodson’s home and has purchased the two adjoining row house (1540 and 1542) to function as exhibition space. In addition to exploring the life and work of Woodson, the house is meant to act as an orientation center for a walking tour of Shaw, highlighting its rich African American history and again connecting itself to the neighborhood beyond the boundaries of its four walls. Not only does the site’s history and location have direct connections to the content of the exhibition, it also takes the exhibition outside of the traditional museum space and places it in the community, addressing community issues in the spirit of Dr. Woodson. In confronting relevant contemporary issues, the inaugural exhibition would establish the Carter G Woodson Historic House as a space dedicated to the neighborhood and will effectively engage longtime residents who may be skeptical of the intentions of institutions like the National Park Service.

12 Ibid., viii.
Overview of Audience:

The exhibition’s primary target audiences are past and present residents of the Shaw neighborhood and more specifically young adults in their late teens to early thirties belonging to the millennial generation and their parents who grew up there during the 1970s. The secondary audience is students at Howard University, and the tertiary audience is anyone who is interested in DC history, African American history, or cultural heritage exhibitions. The exhibition is not geared toward children because of some of the more upsetting content including violence, poverty, and discrimination. The audience will play a key role in the exhibition experience: the exhibit hopes to facilitate conversations between the different generations, and become a place for past and long-term residents to tell and record their stories. Community curators will engage local schools and organizations, and partner with DC history stakeholders like the Historical Society of Washington, DC, Shaw Main Streets, and others. This will encourage multiple organizations to participate and give multiple voices and perspectives to the narrative as it evolves in a continual effort to respond to the community.

Overview of Challenges

“Culture is, after all, an intensely personal matter.”

-Emily Dennis Harvey, Museum for the People

Again and again throughout my research discussions from the Seminar on Neighborhood Museums held 45 years ago still rang true. The report suggests that a neighborhood museum cannot be successful until the idea and function of a museum is reexamined and redefined, and that in turn a museum cannot be redefined until “more basic issues that concern minority groups have been dealt with.”14 The report argues that

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13 Harvey, Emily Dennis, and Bernard Friedberg, eds. x.
14 Ibid., ix.
if a museum sought to create a “community advisory council, a jazz workshop, or poetry class” both the community and trustees would respond with a resounding, “Why?” For the trustees, the question would relate to the function of the museum: “Why? What purpose would it serve? Why depart from our original purpose and function?”. For the community the question would relate to distrust in the museum’s intentions: “Why? What are your intentions? Do you know anything about us, what our needs, interests, and problems are? What our concept of culture is?” While we are now 45 years removed from the seminar, many of these feelings are still alive today. The challenges of authentic engagement and trust building are the most important and difficult this proposal attempts to address.

“As public historians and archaeologists around the world endeavor to transform aloof representations of the past into sites of conscience and social healing, the challenge of honest presentation assumes greater urgency.”

- Public Historian

The proposed exhibition is not easy-- it should not be taken on lightly, as it is steeped in complex historical tensions and contemporary frustrations. The challenges reach beyond those of budget, space limitations, and accessibility that affect any museum operation, but extend to the role of the museum itself, how it functions and engages with a skeptical and frustrated audience that has seen too many new amenities or businesses pop up, not for them, but for the newcomers and in turn contribute to the displacement, skyrocketing rental prices, and erasure of a neighborhood they know and love.

Ibid.

This proposal will address each of these challenges in site, audience, and topic history and will look to precedents, examining what has been done before, what is successful, and what is not successful in order to ensure a meaningful exhibition. However, focusing solely on these challenges is, I believe, equally as dangerous as entering into this project with cavalier naiveté. Doing so, you risk characterizing the neighborhood as closed-minded and unwelcoming, when in fact, it is culturally vibrant and committed to preservation. Yes, careful consideration has to be take for each and every decision, but asking questions and listening to every response, through anger, frustration, or uncomfortable accusations is paramount for an effective exhibition and admitting and then casting aside your own fears or false assumptions is necessary to endeavor in a project that is actually relevant and truthfully confronts the issues of our contemporary times.

To address these challenges, this proposal will walk through the research methodology and findings that are essential to creating such an exhibition, as well as the specific exhibition information including design, content, and interpretive plan. It will argue that by working in a more intimate scope the museum can be responsive and flexible. The exhibition reflects the evolving story of the neighborhood, while the historic house acts as a more permanent container of the past that does not ignore the present in which it sits.
“Research is a continuing need and the life blood of good preservation. Both historical authenticity and proper interpretation need facts.”

- Edward P Alexander, American Historian

**Research Methodology & Findings**

**Expectations and Overview of Research Goals & Approach**

I began my research looking for the untold story of the 1970s. I came to this with a Bachelors degree in US History, prior knowledge of the historic events of the time, and experience researching African American “vernacular culture” with the National Museum of African American History and Culture where I presented and facilitated a guided discussion on my findings for the “Cultural Expressions” Gallery central video to curators. Through that experience I began to examine how the African American narrative was currently being told in the Washington, DC area and think about how different museum experiences can shape our understanding of history. I had to ask myself, what gap would “Our Stories” at the Carter G Woodson Historic Home fill?

I found that the biggest gap was in how museums, particularly historic sites, address contemporary issues, like gentrification and racial tension. Gentrification affects the history and heritage of a neighborhood and creates an opportunity for museums to engage with communities to preserve and recognize this important history. In engaging in this way they must challenge themselves to confront the issues of racial tension and housing inequity on top of less defined, but still present issues of white guilt,

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defensiveness, and cultural differences. It was the articulation of my ultimate goal that lead to thoughtful and directed research that created a solid foundation for the proposal of this challenging, but important exhibition.

Research for this proposal focuses on overcoming the many challenges and complexities of the exhibition in order to guarantee success and positive reception from the community. A curatorial and community advisory group will develop more specific exhibition content narratives, which will be essential partnerships in producing the exhibition. The goal of the research was to thoroughly understand the:

- proposed exhibition **topic**: Life in Shaw in the 1970s.
- proposed exhibition **site** and contextual implications of the physical space and geographic location (all of which inform the topic, target audience, and narrative).
- proposed exhibition target **audiences**: Current and past residents of Shaw and multi generational groups.
- **precedents**: what models, already established, can inform the exhibition?

Additionally, research attempted to answer these questions about museum experiences and functions:

- what does it mean to create a truly inclusive space?
- why are the majority of museum visitors white\(^\text{18}\)?
- what will resonate with established residents, what alienates them?
- what are successes and failures of community or neighborhood museums?

Cultural Tourism DC and the Shaw Neighborhood Heritage Trail states that “the process of creating a Neighborhood Heritage Trail begins with the community, extends

\(^{18}\) Farrell, Betty, and Maria Medvedeva. 8.
through story-sharing and oral history gathering, and ends in formal scholarly research.” Embracing this process ultimately proved successful in creating an intentionally site-centered exhibition that addresses community issues. Additionally, to better understand the historical framework for events in Shaw, I began reading about the Black Arts Movement, Funk, the Black Panther Party, and the “Black Aesthetic” where I found parallel ideas about self representation, identity politics, power, and culture. In conjunction, research focused on museum theory, studies on engaging a diverse audience, and new ways of telling the African American story. The complexities of site, audience, and exhibit content are tightly intertwined as one informs the next and each requires a broad and focused view of the place and time.

The complex and challenging nature of this research and the often, personal examination of my own identity and role in and outside of the Shaw community has been an enriching experience that I believe will inform my practice as an exhibition designer from this point on.

Exhibition Topic

**Topic Research Goals**

The exhibition is about life in Shaw, both past and present. Through the stories of residents who lived in the neighborhood in the 1970s, visitors can re-engage with a history that many people fear may be lost in present conditions. Specific narratives will be identified and recorded through a partnership between a community advisory board and a curatorial team. For the purposes of the proposal the topic research focuses on the more complex nuances of the Shaw community as whole, which is equally important, as

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it will act as the foundation of the exhibition narrative. Research was aimed at finding common memories of this specific place and time that will resonate with longtime residents and encourage them to share their own personal histories.

**Topic Research Challenges**

Researching the topic presented three major challenges:

1. **Building Relationships:**

   I am not a member of this community or a member of the target audience. I look like the Shaw neighborhood “newcomers.” I am white, in my late 20s, and not from DC. Therefore I found myself trying to convince people that despite my background and age I am genuinely interested in preserving the history of this neighborhood and that I am committed to developing an authentic experience for residents who have lived in Shaw for years. Much of my time was spent researching the history of the neighborhood outside of academic writing and archives and in building relationships with community members and local organizations.

2. **Shaw History 1970-1979:**

   Finding information on Shaw DC after the 1968 riots and before the metro came in 1999 proved to be exceedingly difficult. Often sources spoke of Shaw’s vibrant Black community of the 1920s and 30s and highlight U Street’s place as “Black Broadway” and the home of Duke Ellington. Or they document the tragedy of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April of 1968 and the subsequent riots in the Shaw-U Street corridor. I found a few sources that discuss the drug wars and the crack epidemic that took hold of the neighborhood in the 1980s, but none that really explore what was happening in the 1970s. A variety of sources talk about the rapid shift in Shaw after the metro arrived, the
current state of the neighborhood, and the plight of residents battling gentrification, but there is a real lack of scholarly research that discusses Shaw in the 1970s.

3. Authenticity and Sensitivity:

“Hiding history is not necessary, but deciding the level of divulged details is the key to appropriate interpretation.”

- The Public Historian

The content I did find specific to the 1970s deals with racial tension, discrimination, and a declining neighborhood. It also looks at a time that is only 40 years removed in a rapidly transitioning neighborhood. Therefore the challenge of how to present this topic history through the medium of exhibition, which by its nature is an experience, proved to be difficult. This is especially true because of the specific changes occurring in the neighborhood now and the implications of any narrative presented by an outside institution like the National Park Service. It is very important that the exhibit does not perpetuate the story of a “Black neighborhood in decline” and “white revitalization.” It must be sensitive to the audience, but balance that sensitivity with authentic narratives.

**Topic Research Methodology**

1. Building Relationships:

Embracing the process of the Shaw Neighborhood Heritage Trail I started with residents. Collecting interviews and contacting community organizations, and supporting that research with academic and archival research. Informally, I interviewed current and past residents of the District and the Shaw neighborhood, asking them about

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their experiences in the 1970s, what they remember as being distinct about that time, how they felt during that decade, what music they listened to, and what they did for fun.

I conducted these interviews at Shiloh Baptist Church in the heart of Shaw, at the “Save our African American Treasures” event at the Historical Society of Washington, DC, and the HBCU (Historically Black College or University) Howard University located in Shaw.

In addition to talking with individuals, I also reached out to community organizations (with varying success) including:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Mission or History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ONE DC: Organizing for Neighborhood Equity in Shaw and the District</td>
<td>“ONE DC (formerly Manna CDC) was founded in 1997 in the midst of neighborhood change. From early on, ONE DC’s approach to community development addressed structural causes of poverty and injustice, an orientation that stemmed from deep analysis of race, power, and the economic, political, and social forces at work in Shaw and the District. As a result, ONE DC’s organizing work centers on popular education, community organizing, and alternative economic development projects.”(^{21})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiloh Baptist Church</td>
<td>Shiloh Baptist Church of Washington, D.C. was founded in 1863 and has been a staple in the Shaw community ever since.(^{22})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaw Main Streets</td>
<td>“Shaw Main Streets works through four core committees: Design, Economic Revitalization, Organization, and Promotion, each with a distinct but complementary work plan geared towards strengthening the economic base, improving the image, and marketing the Shaw neighborhood. The program is based upon the model developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street Center and is part of a network of 1,000+ programs nationwide that share strategies and tactics.”(^{23})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ujamaa School</td>
<td>Founded in 1968 and located on 8th St NW Ujamaa School believes in Pan-Africanism and Nationalism, and in the teachings and doctrines of the Honorable Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Kwamé Nkrumah.(^{24})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^{21}\) “About ONE DC.” [Onedconline.org](http://onedconline.org/about), n.d. onedconline.org/about.

\(^{22}\) “Shiloh Baptist Church History (full Version).” [Shilohbaptist.org](http://www.shilohbaptist.org/pages/page.asp), n.d.

\(^{23}\) “Who We Are.” [Shawmainstreets.org](http://www.shawmainstreets.org/who_we_are/our_approach), n.d.

2. **Shaw History 1970-1979:**

In order to broaden my research I utilized the two major institutions that document and preserve local DC history: Historical Society of Washington, DC and DC Public Library. At the Historical Society of Washington, DC and Kiplinger Research Library, I sifted through pieces of their collection that are specific to the U Street and Shaw neighborhoods, and then narrowed my search to documents from the 1970s. Also, because of my audience research which indicated that music and specifically DC music is a main interest, I explored what they had in terms of Funk and Go-Go history of DC during the designated time period. At the DC Public Library I made an appointment with their Special Collections Department and utilized their extensive “Washingtoniana” collection.

I also relied heavily on newspapers like the Baltimore “Afro American Times,” which was mentioned by several people as a staple in any African American household in the DC Metro area during the 60s and 70s as well as the Washington Post.

Other resources included:

- EPA Quality of Life Study, 1970s
- Urban Institute
- National Archives, Documerica Project—“For the Documerica Project (1971-1977), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) hired freelance photographers to capture images relating to environmental problems, EPA activities, and everyday life in the 1970s.” This collection is now digitized and housed at the National Archives.\(^{25}\)
- StoryCorps—“Since 2003, StoryCorps has collected and archived more than 50,000 interviews with over 90,000 participants. Each conversation

is recorded on a CD to share, and is preserved at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.”

- Library of Congress- Civil Rights Oral History Project
- Timera- Images of Washington, DC

Moving outside research specific to Shaw and Washington, DC I looked at 70s films and TV shows that were mentioned in interviews and surveys as well as ones that were popular at the time to help inform aesthetic and popular culture content. While they are not a direct window into anyone’s life and are a small sampling of what is available, they do help inform what was popular and what people reacted to. Sources for this type of research included:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Resource</th>
<th>Title (Year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Shaft (1971)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Sweet Sweetback’s Badass Song (1971)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Coffy (1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary Film</td>
<td>Wattstax (1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Uptown Saturday Night (1974)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television Show</td>
<td>Good Times (1974-1979)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television Show</td>
<td>Flip Wilson Show (1970-1974)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television Show</td>
<td>Soul Train (1971- )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedian</td>
<td>Richard Pryor Stand Up (1974)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television Special</td>
<td>Black History: Lost, Stolen, or Strayed (1968)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Performance</td>
<td>Parliament-Funkadelic and the Mothership Connection (1976)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Buy the World a Coke (1971)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Afro Sheen (1970s)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 2 Film Research, Visual Note Taking

In addition to looking at films and TV made in the 1970s I wanted to see how contemporary movies and historical programming looked at the time to compare how they “set the scene,” and how they presented the time period aesthetically and thematically. Sources for this research include:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Resource</th>
<th>Title (Year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td><em>Do the Right Thing</em> (1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td><em>Crooklyn</em> (1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Mini Series</td>
<td><em>Many Rivers to Cross</em> (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(PBS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **Authenticity and Sensitivity:**

With a thorough understanding of the exhibition content, I began searching for information on how the topic or similar topics are displayed in African American history museums and how they balance authenticity and sensitivity in exhibitions. I also looked at how historic homes interpreted history.

**Topic Research Findings:**

1. **Building Relationships:**

The research conducted in the community proved not only the necessity of a neighborhood space where history and personal experiences can be openly discussed, but enlightened me to the many issues, tensions, and even awkwardness of discussing racial history as an “outsider.” At the same time, the openness and excitement I came across in discussing the exhibition with people in the neighborhood was invaluable and immensely encouraging.

Based on this research it will be essential to:

1. Leverage an established organization like the National Park Service and the legacy of Carter G. Woodson to partner fully with residents, community activists, and organizations.
2. Form a community advisory board, one that can work at the grassroots level to inform exhibition design and content.
3. Solicit more feedback and information (with the assistance of the advisory board and a curatorial team) from current and past residents in order to tell stories of real residents in the 1970s to enrich the exhibition.

4. Create a communications plan for dealing with skepticism or criticism and firmly articulate the purpose, the mission, and the goal of the exhibition to the community.

Unfortunately, some key community organizations (like the Ujamaa School on 8th St, est. 1968) were less willing to respond to my inquiries, but engaging with an advisory board of long time residents and a diverse team of historians and museum professional could be effective in constructing those crucial relationships and eventually inform the exhibition in real ways. Despite some of the roadblocks I encountered in my research, it is clear that preservation of history in Shaw is top of mind for a lot of residents from diverse backgrounds and ages.

2. **Shaw History 1970-1979:**

   The 1970s, much like today, were a time of huge and uncontrollable change for the Shaw neighborhood, which was struggling to recover after the 1968 riots. The exhibit will touch on issues of poverty, crime, and discrimination, which were prevalent at the time, while highlighting and remembering the more positive events of the unique time and place. Known as the “Chocolate City” in the 1970s the term underscored the fact that Washington was a majority Black city that saw unprecedented black local political power and a thriving art and culture scene. By confronting these tougher topics and highlighting Shaw and DC’s specific history in its inaugural exhibition, the Carter G

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Woodson Historic Site can show that it is committed to preserving the neighborhood’s heritage and at the same time provide a much needed space relevant to longtime residents.

My research within the community revealed that people are interested in reflecting back on that time and sharing their memories. Based on feedback I received and archival research I did I was able to edit down topic areas to is relevant and important, not only in a historical sense, but also a contemporary one: food, music, politics, religion, and education. These stories have to connect to the interests and memories stated by residents in interviews and will reflect the themes of power, identity, and self-representation. (See Appendix 1 Topic History for a timeline of major events in the area from 1970-1979).

3. **Authenticity and Sensitivity:**

“The dream of authenticity is a present-day myth. We cannot recreate, reconstruct, or recapture the past. We can only tell stories about the past in present-day language, based on our present-day concerns and the knowledge (built, to be sure, out of documents and evidence) we construct today.”

-Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg*

Understanding, that the exhibit cannot be truly authentic, but will still need to feel authentic and will need to resonate with the audience is key. The challenge the exhibit faces in terms of credibility in a gentrifying neighborhood is a big one, but the solution will be to design the exhibition in a way that removes the voice of the historian.

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or curator and to attribute that voice to real experiences of residents. This allows for multiple voices and perspectives to be heard. An exploration of precedents later in this proposal will piece apart the possibilities and inform the ultimate design direction.

Research shows that the issue of presenting an uncomfortable historical narrative is complex, but is also essential in creating a rich experience that acknowledges the issues of the past and paves the way to discuss issues affecting contemporary society. However, recreating an immersive environment that explores discrimination, poverty, or other traumatic events like the 1968 riots has the potential to “turnoff” many visitors for whom the content may hit “too close to home.” Being sensitive to that will be an essential part of the design. This does not mean gilding over these important topics, but it does mean conscientious presentation will need to be implemented. This idea is best articulated through examples and is discussed in much greater detail in the precedents section of this proposal.

**Audience**

> “People are steadily getting tired of people planning for them rather than with them.”
>  
> ~Julia Hare, Museum for the People

**Audience Research Goals**

The goal for this research is to better understand the community where the exhibition will be located and in doing so, create an exhibition that will resonate with the target audience: past and present residents of the Shaw neighborhood as well as encourage dialogue and engagement between groups of multigenerational visitors.

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29 Ibid.
30 Baumann, Timothy, Andrew Hurley, Valerie Altizer, and Victoria Love, 37.
31 Harvey, Emily Dennis, and Bernard Friedberg, eds. 3.
Audience Research Challenge

“Each visitor brings his or her own framework of unique knowledge, memories, and expectations that need to be activated by the place and its presentation.”

- Frank Matero, Interpretation, Experience and the Past

Much like the topic history, the biggest challenge was approaching people as an outsider and dispelling skepticism and gaining trust. Continued audience research should be conducted once community relationships are more firmly built and an advisory committee is created by the National Park Service for the development of the exhibition content.

Audience Research Method

Audience research focused on the target audience, multigenerational residents of Shaw and DC, as well as demographics of the site location. The approach branched in three informative avenues:

1. Qualitative research:
   a. How do museums encourage and engage a diverse audience?
   b. How do they facilitate intergenerational dialogue and participation?

2. Quantitative research:
   a. What are the demographics of the site?
   b. What are millennials and baby boomers like? What resonates with them?

2. Community conversations:
   a. Interviews with Howard University students and staff.

\[32\] Matero, Frank G., 158.
b. Interviews with Shaw community stakeholders and area museum professionals.

c. Interviews with Shaw community members and longtime DC residents.

Audience Research Findings

Qualitative research

In a survey of over 30,000 “museum-going households,” 91% identified themselves as white.\textsuperscript{33} The 2010 report continues to breakdown the numbers, but the bottom line is the majority of museum visitors are white, non-Hispanic. Recently, museums of all sizes have begun to focus on diversity and inclusion, asking tough questions about what it means to cater to diverse visitors.\textsuperscript{34} Researchers have offered various explanations for this pattern of homogeneity in museum attendance, including:

- historically-grounded cultural barriers to participation that make museums feel intimidating and exclusionary to many people
- no strong tradition of museum-going habits, whether these were fostered in childhood or other family experience and tradition;
- the influence of social networks to encourage museum-going rather than other leisure activities—i.e., if none of your friends go to museums, you do not go either.\textsuperscript{35}

In addition to these possible factors, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) states that part of issue stems back to a “legacy of historic discrimination.”\textsuperscript{36} This historic pattern of exclusion, subtle or unsubtle, according to John Falk, author of


\textsuperscript{34} Farrell, Betty, and Maria Medvedeva, 8.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 13.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
Identity and the Museum Experience, may be the reason why “fewer African American families instill museum-going habits in their young children.”37 AAM also points to more recent studies that have “identified a distinct cultural psychology among African Americans, rooted in historical and social experience, which has produced heightened sensitivity to stereotypes and real or perceived racism.”38

In looking at art and cultural events, marketing studies have found that it is more likely for African Americans to attend events “in which Blacks are well-represented among performers, staff, and audience members.”39 A survey by the Urban Institute supports this claim, “which found that African American and Hispanic participants were more likely than others to list the desire to ‘celebrate heritage’ and ‘support a community organization’ as reasons to attend arts and cultural events.”40

Museums and exhibitions need to actively invite, include, and involve different racial and ethnic groups. To do this they must acknowledge and present exhibitions and programs that are “compatible with the lived experiences of the desired audiences.”41 Allowing for and celebrating multiple perspectives gives voice to those experiences that act as signs of “welcomeness” and “opens a dialogue and can be paired with content or themes.”42 In congruence with this concept of “welcomeness,” extensive audience and visitor research can also reveal is what “‘baggage’ the museum itself may carry, as well as the expectations of visitors.”43 Understanding this is vital in planning any exhibition, but is especially essential when planning an exhibition in a transitioning neighborhood

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 14.
40 Ibid.
41 Clark, Carol, Pat Stephens Williams, Michael Legg, and Ray Darville. “Visitor Responses to Interpretation at Historic Kingsley Plantation.” (Journal of Interpretation Research 16, no. 2 December 2011), 25.
42 Ibid., 26
43 Ibid., 26
where tensions around race are high and feelings of “welcomeness”, and more importantly “unwelcomeness”, are heightened.

In addition to creating an inclusive environment that attempts to confront social issues on site, the exhibit will attempt to facilitate intergenerational dialogue about these issues and personal history sharing. Increasingly, museums have been attempting to engage social groups of visitors, rather than individuals to create richer and more memorable experiences. In doing this they also recognize that, “there always needs to be room for groups to engage as much or as little as they want.” Providing multiple levels of engagement as well as subtle or explicit instruction, depending on the activity, will be essential in designing an exhibit hoping to promote dialogue. This diversity in participation creates a comfortable environment for various learning styles as well as cultural differences.

Additionally, because of the exhibitions focus on residents of Shaw in the 1970s, it will allow those who share similar or related histories (i.e. alumni of Howard University, longtime residents of Shaw) to act as experts and contribute to exhibition content either formally in video booths and interactives or informally through conversation. It is important to note, “cultures vary on their assumptions about what the purpose of coming to a museum is and what role adults will take during their visit.” Therefore structuring the exhibition in a less traditional way and in a home can help to create queues for sharing that have the potential to spark more engaged “non-museum” behavior. The exhibition has to be full of life and conversation and the design will need to encourage visitors in those activities.

46 Gaskins, Suzanne, 14.
47 Ibid., 16.
Quantitative research

The composition of the greater Washington area definitely skews “millennial” with a median age of 33. Population estimates from the Census Bureau puts DC’s population at 646,499 with 50.7% identifying as African American. Shaw specifically has over 11,500 residents with a median age of 31 and just fewer than half, 48%, identifying as African American.

Looking to the Howard University campus, with its approximately 11,000 students, as a place to engage visitors, it is important to explore how millennials engage with their surroundings. There is an emerging consensus that museums in the future will be places where you do more than visit and absorb information, but will be a place where you hangout and contribute. They will be “moderators and filters of contributed wisdom and diverse perspectives, in addition to being sources of scholarship and opinion.”

According to the PEW Research Center, millennials are confident, self-expressive, upbeat and open to change. They are also known for liberal views on many political and social issues, “ranging from a belief in an activist government to support for same-sex marriage and marijuana legalization.” Millennials are also “the most racially diverse generation in American history.” It is this diversity that can be attributed to their political liberalism. Millennials, despite their progressive leanings, still respect

51 Farrell, Betty, and Maria Medvedeva, 31.
52 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
their elders. “A majority says that the older generation is superior to the younger
generation when it comes to moral values and work ethic.”\(^{55}\)

Their parents, part of the “Baby Boomer” generation, came of age in the late
1960s and 1970s, leading the “civil rights, women’s rights, anti-war and counter-cultural
movements of that turbulent era.”\(^{56}\) In 1972, a large numbers of Boomers were eligible to
vote for the first time and like their millennial children, “they skewed much more
Democratic than their elders.”\(^{57}\) Understanding the basics of how these demographics
interact with each other and museums will contribute to the overall exhibition design,
but more specific conversations with the target audience provides a more informed and
substantial direction.

**Community Conversations:**

Howard University interviews revealed that many young people in the area are
interested in Shaw, its history, and the 1970s. However, about half of the students
interviewed are not from Washington, DC. With Howard’s reputation, the University
draws students from all over the country. Those who are from DC remarked that the
Shaw neighborhood, along with many other DC neighborhoods have changed drastically.
In fact, one sophomore I spoke with said that she is sure past residents would love to see
an exhibit about them, but that current [white] residents will not care and, to quote her,
“all they care about is brunch.” This simple statement reveals so much about the current
climate for DC residents and the importance of creating honestly inclusive spaces that
honor and preserve Shaw’s heritage. I also learned that many current Howard students
are legacy students, meaning their grandparents or parents also attended the University.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.


\(^{57}\) Ibid.
It will be important to showcase Howard’s important history and its impact on the local community to draw in current students and their parents or other alumni alike.

Other interviews at the DC Elevation event: “Gentrification, Revitalization, or Renaissance,” revealed trepidation around the topic and mixed optimism and skepticism around the exhibit concept. Many believed that the Carter G Woodson Historic Home would be a great location for a community museum and to quote one gentleman I spoke with, “the newcomers don’t know about him yet.” Some worried that looking at the 1970s would again emphasize the story of the “black neighborhood in decline.” When I talked more about my goal of dispelling that myth some were more receptive to the idea especially when I cited the work done by the Shiloh Baptist Church during the 70s and the local crime reduction force called “red hats” of Shaw. Showing this knowledge of lesser-known aspects of Shaw’s history did a lot to garner trust.

Both of these experiences made me hyper aware of: 1. the need to tell this story and 2. the importance of doing so in an honest and conscientious way including creating a space for individuals and community groups to tell their story. By allowing them to curate a room or display historical objects significant to them, it frees the museum from speaking singularly about the past and creates a contemporary lens with which to view the neighborhood’s history. Successful examples of this are outlined in the section of the paper dealing with precedents.

Historical Society of Washington, DC, Save our African American Treasures Event
In addition to working in the Shaw neighborhood, I again partnered with the Historical Society of Washington, DC to interview and survey attendees at the National Museum of African American History and Culture’s “Save Our African American Treasures” event. This event drew in an older demographic and provided a comfortable environment for people to talk about their personal history. The purpose of the event was to allow the public to bring in personal artifacts and have “professional conservators, curators and collections managers contributed their expertise... identifying historical items and providing preservation guidance.”

People I spoke of were less caught off guard by questions about sharing their experiences and histories with me. It was the perfect opportunity to engage with a captive audience who actively attended an event dedicated to the preservation of African American history. I was able to get some feedback from attendees about what types of museum experiences they enjoyed and get their reactions to the proposed exhibition. Most were very positive and several commented that they liked reflecting on that time period and they do not see much about it around DC. One of the issues I found with surveying people at this event was that only 4 out of the 30 people I spoke with live or lived in the Shaw area in the 1970s and only about half live in DC currently.

*(See Appendix 3 for all survey responses).*

**Site**

**Site Research Goal**

The goal of site research was to identify a space that is rooted in the community architecturally and in purpose rather than standing out or standing apart. In doing so, create a neighborhood-based exhibition that responds to contemporary needs through

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historical narrative interpretation, visitor engagement, and storytelling. The site will need to be comfortable and accessible so it can encourage past and present residents to gather, tell their stories, and be heard in the midst of often overwhelming change. Additionally, because of the specific challenges that the gentrification of the neighborhood has created, research for the proposed exhibition has to go beyond identifying and understanding the site, but delve into the historical context and museology surrounding exhibitions.

**Site Research Challenge**

Site research proved to be some of the most complex and multidimensional research. The Shaw neighborhood presents a unique opportunity to explore how museums and specifically history-based exhibitions can serve as a means of addressing contemporary social issues. It was crucial to get the location right in order to address the many challenges associated with a gentrifying neighborhood. Meaning the space had to feel authentic and intentional in its pursuit of preserving Shaw's history and face the skepticism and mistrust that is associated with those efforts by non-community members or institutions like museums, but at the same time it needed to be self aware of its limitations. Therefore, it could not be housed in a new build or even a space with “institutional vibes”.

**Site Research Methodology**

The reason for the complexity of site research is inherent in the context it sets for the visitor and the context it places on the content being displayed. In order to make a fully informed decision and to understand the framework in which I am proposing the exhibition I focused on four main avenues for site research:
1. Cultural museums in the DC metropolitan area

I started by examining what heritage and cultural history museums already exist and what types of experiences they offer visitors. I asked the following questions:

- What are their strengths and weaknesses?
- What type of experience do they provide visitors?
- What function do they fulfill and how is the proposed site different?

2. Community and Neighborhood Museums

Research into existing museums in turn informed my next question which, examines what I believe is a gap in the DC museum landscape: Community or Neighborhood-based Museums. I asked the questions:

- How do neighborhood museums function?
- What is the historical context of their creation?
- What are examples of successful neighborhood museums?

3. Historic Homes and Narrative Spaces

Because the proposed exhibit is to take place in the Carter G Woodson Historic Home’s exhibition space, then there are expectations and increased contextual factors at play that must be considered. In order inform the design, interpretation methods, and accessibility I needed to understand how house museums interpret and exhibit collections and then determine if there is there is a bridge between neighborhood museums and house museums that can make them engaging and relevant to the surrounding residents. I focused on why historic homes continually struggle for attendance, financial support, and relevance and countered those findings with the unique and important role historic homes have to play in creating a neighborhood-based exhibition through site-specific interpretation.
4. **Museology and Appropriating Culture**

Museums place meaning on objects.\(^{59}\) The very nature of the exhibition topic, site, and how it deals with race, including in subtle ways, the commodification of culture had to be addressed. If the exhibition is to confront the issues affecting this rapidly changing neighborhood including fear and anger toward outsiders and skepticism of perceived “white” institutions research into how museums function is pivotal.

5. **Carter G Woodson House & the National Park Service**

Finally, after understanding all of these layers, research looked specifically at the Carter G. Woodson Historic House, its connection to the neighborhood, and the current plans under the National Park Services.

**Site Research Findings**

“The destiny of the museum is the destiny of the community; their relationship is both symbiotic and catalytic. As it reaches out to the community, the museum is enlivened and explores new ways and means of exhibiting the local heritage and of promoting local issues, thus serving as a catalyst for change.”\(^{60}\)

~John Kinard, Founding Director, Anacostia Neighborhood Museum

The site of the exhibition is as much a part of the narrative as the actual historical content. The site is multidimensional in that the house itself brings context and meaning to the exhibition across time. The location of the house and the rich history of the

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surrounding neighborhood and its current trajectory as a rapidly gentrifying area of the District all add a level of complexity to the exhibition. The site’s importance lies in the physical structure, the geographical boundary of the neighborhood, and its role as the conceptual container of ideas around family, identity, and communal memory.

Each part of the exhibition, topic, site, audience, all informing and being informed by the other creates the potential for a unique experiential exhibition that goes beyond the constraints of a traditional institution and connects directly with the makers of history it aims to celebrate. At the same time the site provides a comfortable and welcoming space for groups marginalized by larger institutions. Scaling down the scope and size from the national institutions that currently present cultural history in DC will allow the historic home to cater and be adaptable to local concerns. The site will encourage input and participation and have actionable results and changes based on that input and participation.

The Carter G. Woodson House (1538 9th St NW) and its adjoining row houses (1540, 1542) serve as the perfect space for a community-focused experience in Shaw. Woodson was the first scholar of African American history to move “away from telling the stories of the Black elite, and instead began to promote the rich history of Black folk culture, with its deep roots in Africa.” Under the National Park Service, the Home of Woodson will be recreated, reflecting his time there from 1915 until his death in 1950. The adjoining row houses (1540 and 1542) will serve as exhibition space. This proposed inaugural exhibition will fill a gap in the museum landscape of DC that addresses important community issues and concerns, establishing itself as a relevant part of Shaw and will reflect the legacy and intentions of Dr. Woodson.

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61 Burns, Andrea Alison, 8.
These findings are supported by additional research into the other cultural museums in the DC area, the Community and Neighborhood Museum Model, historic homes and narrative spaces, museology and appropriating culture, and history and plans by NPS for the Carter G Woodson House. Please see Appendix 1 Site Research for detailed research on each of these topics.
Precedents

The following case studies support and inform the goals and mission of the proposed exhibition. Their successes, strategies, risks, and even missteps serve as essential precedents for responsive museum and exhibition design as well as transformative narrative experiences.

**Historic Interpretation with a Contemporary Lens: Weeksville Heritage Center**

“It is one of the embittering paradoxes of gentrification that as money flows in, history, an asset of incalculable value, is swept away.”


Weeksville Heritage Center, located in what are now the Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights neighborhoods of Brooklyn, New York, faces many of the same issues as the Shaw neighborhood of Washington, DC. Much like DC, Brooklyn has experienced major demographic shifts in the last ten years. Again, like Shaw, Weeksville is steeped in early African American history and the preservation of that history is threatened by gentrification and rapid redevelopment.

Named after John Weeks, an ex-slave from Virginia who moved to New York in 1838, the village is one of America’s first intentional, free African American

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The word intentional is used because James Weeks created a community of landowning African Americans at a time when owning land was a requirement to vote, a radical move at the time. By the Civil War the village had over 500 residents along with municipal buildings, churches, a newspaper (*The Freedman’s Torchlight*), and a school. It was the building of the Brooklyn Bridge and the movement of the greater New York’s population into the area that caused the community to be absorbed into its surroundings.\(^6^5\)

Saved by community pressure, the three remaining homes on Hunterfly Road make up the Weeksville Heritage Center. Its **mission** is to

“To document, preserve and interpret the history of free African American communities in Weeksville, Brooklyn and beyond and to create and inspire innovative, contemporary uses of African American history through education, the arts, and civic engagement.”\(^6^6\)

To do this, Historic Weeksville takes a “multi-dimensional” approach. From the programming to the exhibitions the heritage center is the embodiment of that word. By “using a contemporary lens” the center engages visitors while activating the place’s unique history “through the presentation of innovative, vanguard and experimental programs.”\(^6^7\) Going beyond the content they explore ways to engage the built and natural environment, which creates a complex and rich narrative across space and time.

Weeksville Heritage Center’s approach to communicating its history in its current environment showcases an acute understanding of its constituency and audience and at the same time places them at the forefront of exhibition practice. Their programs and exhibits go outside the didactic historical narrative and connect with visitors’ modern

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\(^{6^5}\) Cotter, Holland.

\(^{6^6}\) “About.” *WEEKSVILLE HERITAGE CENTER*.

\(^{6^7}\) Ibid.
concerns and life.⁶⁸ This shows a unique and impressive understanding of their place in both historical and contemporary context, which has added to their success, legitimacy, and value within the community.

“Funk, God, Jazz & Medicine: Black Radical Brooklyn can’t do much. It’s only art, and it’s only on view through Sunday. But its restorative spirit should be kept alive, in place, from here on.”⁶⁹

-Holland Cotter, New York Times

The Weeksville’s most recent exhibition, Funk, God, Jazz, & Medicine: Black Radical Brooklyn, which has been widely praised, exemplifies their commitment to relevancy and the importance and power of cultural heritage. This serves as informative precedent for the proposed exhibition as Funk, God, Jazz, & Medicine provides visitors with a “textured view of the past.” The exhibition consists of four separate but interconnected components:

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⁶⁹ Cotter, Holland.
**Funk**- Artist Xenobia Bailey and students of Boys and Girls High school created an installation “Funktional”, which re-imagines a 21st century studio apartment occupied by two fictional African immigrant designers who have made their own furnishings and decor with recycled domestic materials. This piece examines the “funk aesthetic” and the earlier versions of African American “homegrown chic” like 19th century patchwork quilts.\(^{70}\)

![Image](image_url)

**Fig 7 God, Weeksville Heritage Center, Funk, God, Jazz, & Medicine: Radical Black Brooklyn**

**God**- Held at the Bethel Tabernacle A.M.E. Church, Gingger Shankar's work pays “homage both to the church and its parishioners, who appear in portrait close-ups, and to a neighborhood under threat of change.” The images used: church elders faces, bibles, a ravaged cityscape, have a layered historical and contemporary context that resonates in Brooklyn’s gentrifying landscape.\(^{71}\)

\(^{70}\) Ibid.

\(^{71}\) Ibid.
**Jazz** - A collaboration with the Central Brooklyn Jazz Consortium, this piece is located outside and acts as an “open-air radio station broadcasting live and recorded music and interview with local artists... who share their ideas and histories from the back seat of a sawed-in-half pink Cadillac Coupe de Ville from 1959... when politics and popular entertainment alike were in the streets.”\(^{72}\)

**Medicine** - Creating a richly layered experience is the “Free People’s Medical Clinic” by Simone Leigh, which takes place in the house of Dr. Josephine English, the

\(^{72}\) Ibid.
first African American woman in New York to have a private OB GYN practice. The piece overlays the site's past with its function by creating a walk-in health center with its staff dressed in the uniforms of a 19th century society of black nurses called the United Order of Tents whose headquarters are still in the neighborhood.73

Each of these elements shows that contemporary art, constructed environments, and rich historic narratives can go beyond the didactic to create a layered experience or window to the past. Understanding how to leverage these presentations, interactives, and art can add depth to a history exhibit and reach audiences in a different way.

**Transforming Spaces: No Longer Empty**

No Longer Empty is another organization pushing the boundaries of what it means to engage with the community, and interpret history. Additionally they take on the challenge of transforming underutilized or abandoned space in urban environments. This group serves as an exemplary precedent of what can be achieved when you break apart traditional ideas of what an exhibition is, how the curatorial processes works, and how stories are told.

Based in New York City, No Longer Empty’s **mission**: “activates public engagement with contemporary art through curated, community-responsive exhibitions and education programs that revive underutilized properties.”74 Their **mandate** reads:

> “We harness the power of art to explore the history of buildings and community narratives. No Longer Empty collaborates and co-programs with local organizations, residents, civic leaders and businesses to ensure relevance, to promote cultural vibrancy at the neighborhood level, and to craft legacy programs. Every experience is welcoming and informative, free of the constraints of traditional venues. We inspire lifelong interest in the arts through access, involvement and inclusion.”75

73 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
To execute this mandate, again, community involvement and empowerment is essential. The organization works with curators in the professional and international art world to place established and emerging artist in underutilized spaces in various neighborhoods in the city of New York. Through community interviews and extensive site research the curatorial theme is developed and the history of the building reemerges as a result of this process. One of the beauties of this collaboration is that the site challenges and restriction to the historically informed theme or premise force artists and No Longer Empty to rethink and expand their practice. Therefore each project reinforces their commitment to go beyond the status quo. “At the heart of the experience is community engagement... We nourish and build relationships with the people that come to our exhibitions, the community around our activities, and the artist community we form around us.”76

The level of articulation and the specificity of their aims is impressive and drives their decisions, but within this strict framework they have allowed the freedom and flexibility to react to, and honestly engage with, both internationally known artists and emerging artist, both the community and curators, and both the power and immediacy of art and the complexities and richness of a historical narrative. For these reason, No Longer Empty can serve as a valuable example of how an exhibition, like the one in this proposal, with its myriad of challenges, nuanced and subtle risks, can succeed in providing a valuable space for a community to make their own.

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76 Ibid.
Slavery, Syphilis, Sanitation: Unsavory History at the New-York Historical Society & Scott Joplin House Historic Site

The following examples provide caution and solutions for interpreting and presenting “uncomfortable,” but essential historical narratives. Married to the practice of transparent historical interpretation comes community involvement. Both institutions investigate ways to engage the community, with varying levels of success, but the understanding of their success and shortcomings will greatly inform the proposed exhibition.

New-York Historical Society: Slavery in New York

In 2005 the New-York Historical Society began an exploration into the city's role in slavery. A largely unknown topic to many New Yorkers and Americans alike, the two exhibitions on the topic were largely unprecedented and therefore contentious. Now an online exhibition, Slavery in New York, as stated on the organization's website was, “the first of two exhibitions, spans the period from the 1600s to 1827, when slavery was legally abolished in New York State... It focuses on the rediscovery of the collective and personal experiences of Africans and African-Americans in New York City.”

While the design, content, and narrative of the exhibition is relevant and is widely debated, for the purposes of this proposal the video responses collected in the exhibit provide the richest insight. In his essay, “Talk-Back Culture” in the book Visitor Voices in Museum Exhibitions, Chris Lawrence recounts his experience as the graduate student tasked with watching, cataloging, and tagging the thousands of recorded responses from the exhibition.

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Using the software called Telling Lives in a video recording booth, the institution embarked on mission to understand how people would react to their “truth hurts” subject matter and as Lawrence describes it, what “raw emotions, thoughts, and impressions could be captured when people exit this scab-peeling exhibition.”

In addition to capturing this knowledge for themselves, the museum wanted to use the videos as an interpretive element. Lawrence describes the experience of listening to the videos as being “mesmerized by the speaker’s tone, body language, dress; their gut-level responses; their criticism, reflections, and free associations; their thoughts on modern New York, on America, on the world; even their stories about how they had heard of the exhibition.” The videos revealed more than just reactions to the content, they gave evidence to the argument that visitors craved exhibits that did not hide from tough social issues and that museums played a part in exploring those issues and had an opportunity to act as “a safe space for collective debates.”

Lawrence credits the anonymity of the booth for participants’ willingness to vocalize personal, intimate, and important stories, concerns, or frustrations. People were in the moment, constructing thoughts, communicating feelings, and questioning their own understanding. This lead to honest, free associated comments rich in content and predominantly free of self-consciousness. “Even those angered after viewing the exhibition, appeared calmer after having the chance to ‘talk-back.’”

The video recordings revealed something else that the historical society may not have been prepared for, but has hopefully become a new mantra: history and our perception of history, has power in our understanding of our society and

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 65.
81 Ibid.
ourselves. In fact, one video that Lawrence said stood apart from the rest and resonated immensely was one of four young African American men who were enraged by the exhibition. One of the teens in the group stated “after seeing this exhibit I know now why I want to jump you when I see you in the street. I have a better idea about the anger I feel and why I sometimes feel violent towards you.” This statement cannot be ignored, and it cannot be dismissed as posturing for the camera or in front of peers. One part of this complex declaration that is particularly informative to the museum is that he is speaking to the museum as if it has a racial [white] identity. In fact, this teen was not alone in calling the New-York Historical Society “a white or European-American institution,” as many other video respondents echoed the accusation in different ways.

In the end, Lawrence summarizes what he has learned from this charged and complicated project with this: “When you invite audiences to respond to open-ended questions, and take the time to listen, they can breathe life into exhibits and turn our work from monologues to conversations.”

Scott Joplin House State Historic Site, St. Louis Missouri Heritage Project

“...the Scott Joplin Heritage Project fulfills what many have come to see as public history's highest calling, the application of serious research to the challenges that face society today.”

-The Public Historian

The case of the Scott Joplin House Historic Site is an interesting one that has multiple connections to the exhibition proposed in this project. First it is a historic house

\[\text{Ibid., 66.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 67.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 68.}\]
\[\text{Baumann, Timothy, Andrew Hurley, Valerie Altizer, and Victoria Love, 66.}\]
in a historically African American neighborhood. In fact it was the first state historic site in Missouri dedicated to African American heritage.\textsuperscript{86} Second it attempts, and in many ways is successful at, creating a new “community-based heritage project,” which expands the history narrative and delves into more complex social history of, “African American urban migration and the transformation of multi-ethnic neighborhood to the contemporary community.”\textsuperscript{87} Thirdly, to achieve this new model, the Joplin house engaged scholars, local residents, and museum professionals all of which were committed to interpreting the sites “tough history” in order to make a cultural center that is engaging and more inclusive.\textsuperscript{88}

It is the belief of the historic site’s team that when a museum or cultural institution ignores, downplays, or avoids history’s shameful, tragic, or even just uncomfortable events it does a disservice to the historic narrative it is claiming to present and to the audience that encounters this overly constructed narrative.

\textit{“Moreover playing it safe deprives history of its power to promote constructive social and political change.”}\textsuperscript{89}

-Scott Joplin Heritage Project

Scott Joplin, the father of Ragtime music, spent time in a small apartment in St. Louis, Missouri composing his music and performing at local theaters, bars, and halls. The effort to preserve his home within the city started in the 1970s and was part of a grassroots effort to preserve the composer’s legacy in the neighborhood. The project was in limbo for thirty years and until recently it only celebrated Joplin’s contributions to ragtime and in effect ignored his urban milieu. It is under the efforts of the Scott Joplin Heritage Project

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., abstract.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 38.
Heritage Project that the historic site has refocused back to the original mission of expanding the history narrative to include more complex topics like migration and twentieth-century race relations in St. Louis. In doing this, the group had to tackle the issue of presenting the realities of violence, racism, prostitution, syphilis, and even sanitation.\textsuperscript{90}

These issues will make visitors uncomfortable, and it is understandable why publicly funded or publicly minded institutions feel unprepared, unsupported, or unwilling “to go there.” Alienating large segments of the public can be disastrous for an already struggling historic home or site so the impulse to provide a pleasurable experience rather than a potentially negative (but also potentially transformative) one is understandable.

However, it is this cautious approach to history that removes its power, its relevance, and it’s purpose.\textsuperscript{91} It is only through the confrontation of divisive social issues, including racial discord and tension, that museums and historic sites can reclaim their contemporary relevance. “One of the most powerful arguments advanced on behalf of full disclosure is that the revelation of brutal truths can mend social wounds.\textsuperscript{92} In the case of the Scott Joplin House the purpose is worth quoting in full for its clarity and insightfulness:

“By examining the types of uncomfortable issues that typically arise in inner-city settings and suggesting how with caution and care their public interpretation can complement local efforts to create vibrant communities. By proposing a social activist role for historic sites that dynamically engages host communities, we offer an alternative perspective from which to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks associated with prickly historical topics. Far from advocating the raw exposure of ugly or upsetting events merely to generate controversy or draw attention, we urge public historians to consider how sensitive but honest discussion of uncomfortable issues can illuminate those historical processes that continue to impinge on descendant populations. History and \textbf{historic sites can then become agents of democracy, working on behalf}}
of contemporary civic needs and fostering revitalized communities.”

The project’s strategy for executing this is similar to that found in the Shaw Heritage Trail created by Cultural Tourism DC. In order to be successful, it must be committed to involving the public in every phase. In fact, for the Scott Joplin House, they propose “this form of community-based research insists that ordinary citizens generate their own research questions and arrive at conclusions in conjunction with trained professionals.”

To do this, the residents have to be empowered to make decisions for the site, but also for the larger neighborhood revitalization goals. Engaging with community stakeholder in the religious, education, and business sectors the heritage project team was able to develop its research agenda, select relevant and appropriate approaches to communicating history to the public, and solicit feedback from the wider community. In the end, when uncovering the complex historical narrative of the site, the team referred back to its community vision and project goals to find clarity when confronted with its challenges.

However, as experienced by the Joplin House, public input and honest recounting of history do not always interact smoothly. It is the tendency to employ history in order to “make people, the public, feel better about themselves, or to make a better impression on others,” that caused the biggest issue. In fact, the National Museum of African American History and Culture has been equally cautioned by Julianne Malveaux in her article, “New Black Museum: Kudos and Caution” where she warns that Black conservatives are hoping to focus the museum on “solemn reflection and celebration” and not on “finger-pointing.” Malveaux worries that this approach

93 Ibid., 38-39.
94 Ibid., 42-43.
95 Ibid., 48.
continues to ignore the unspoken history of African Americans in this country, which will cause it to fail in its mission to, “heal our nation’s racial wounds.” In the end, the Heritage Project acknowledges that universal satisfaction is an unattainable goal, but has decided to be transparent about its efforts to be a “national leader in the enterprise of connecting historical interpretation with contemporary civic concerns.” This generates the question beyond what to tell, because an honest approach to history is established as essential, but the more important question, how best to tell it.

_History in the Everyday: Tenement Museum in New York_

Similar to the Scott Joplin House Historic site is the Tenement Museum in New York City, which also tells an uncomfortable, site-specific narrative. The Tenement Museum “tell[s] the stories of 97 Orchard Street. Built on Manhattan’s Lower East Side in 1863... home to nearly 7,000 working class immigrants.” The museum is held a standard for boldly addressing social history themes and exploring the daily lives of immigrants. Its mission is to:

“preserves and interprets the history of immigration through the personal experiences of the generations of newcomers who settled in and built lives on Manhattan's Lower East Side, America's iconic immigrant neighborhood; forges emotional connections between visitors and immigrants past and present; and enhances appreciation for the profound role immigration has played and continues to play in shaping America's evolving national identity.”

The lives of six families are currently being interpreted by the museum, all from varied backgrounds, each introducing the visitor to the life and experiences of a resident of the tenements. Its approach has been acknowledged as successful by its steadily increasing

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97 Baumann, Timothy, Andrew Hurley, Valerie Altizer, and Victoria Love. 44.
99 Ibid.
attendance numbers, proving that the “Tenement Museum provides a unique experience that has resonated with many visitors.”

Like any historic house, the Tenement museum cannot create time travel experiences and has a curated story, its success lies in its ability to reach beyond the fact, but to interpret the experience and present it to visitors.

In 2004 the museum launched what they call “Kitchen Conversations” meant to encourage dialogue amongst visitors. These “conversations” use the guided tour as a jumping off point to encourage discussion about past and present immigration issues. In the end the program had mixed success, the difficulty lying in getting visitors to participate, but those that did seemed to leave the museum with a better understanding of their own immigration stories and how it compares to those of today. In fact the Tenement Museum has taken its role even further by offering programming to immigrant populations in New York, moving beyond interpreting history to “creating knowledgeable citizens and empowering immigrants in the present.”

Community Curators: Denver Community Museum

“It prompted experiments with audiences participation and question past versus present, fact versus fiction, and museum voice.”

~Jaime Kopke, Denver Community Museum

A pop-up museum in an empty storefront curated by individual community members challenges the idea of what is valuable to a community, what is culture, and how museums, if willing to relinquish control, can produce meaningful experiences. The

100 Pustz, Jennifer, 31.
101 Ibid., 32.
Denver Community Museum started as an experiment. Jaime Kopke envisioned and executed a completely community curated museum. In 2008 she had a plan: “create a temporary, pop-up museum that would rely one hundred percent on community submissions for its exhibitions... Provide a community space where citizens can share their objects and their stories.”

The approach was clear from the start. It presented itself as a pop-up and as temporary, which may have explained the willingness Kopke found in the community to get involved. She called it an “institution with an expiration date.” Each month Kopke would state a challenge or a question that was to be solved or interpreted by individuals through their submissions. These submissions varied from songs, handmade artifacts, artwork, historical items, and written stories. Jaime says that, “museum professionals may be horrified-- or excited-- to learn that everything submitted was exhibited.” Participants also wrote their own labels, or did not write labels, which were placed “as is” and were completely untouched and unedited.

The Denver Community Museum created a space where “everyone was an armature and an expert as the same time.” There were no limitations on age, skill, or money and its openness became its greatest asset and key to success. Kopke notes that, “we often witness museums trying too hard to make that personal connection, but bold graphics and overbuilt comment stations do little to foster heartfelt responses.”

The museums and exhibitions always included things you could touch, take, or leave behind. It opened the doors of public input and participation to its widest level, and while doing this created an experience unlike any other museum. The Denver Community Museum, while extreme, serves as a reminder of what personal connection

103 Ibid.
104 Ibid., 400.
105 Ibid., 399.
106 Ibid., 400.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
and authentic engagement can bring to more traditional and didactic museums. Opportunities in all exhibitions, especially ones like the proposed which hopes to serve as a community or neighborhood museum, will be served well to embrace the openness, informality, and experimental spirit of the Denver Community Museum.

**Curating Inclusion: Busboys & Poets and Anacostia Art Gallery**

As an exhibition designer, it is essential to pull from sources outside the structured museum field. This includes retail space, hotels, for profit galleries, amusement parks, film, and more. The following examples are places that do not live in the museum world, but do live in the community.

**Busboys & Poets:**

A restaurant / theater / art gallery / bookstore located at 14th & V, in the heart of the U Street Corridor and Shaw neighborhood, Busboys & Poets opened its doors in 2005. Unique in its approach and mission the restaurant is both praised and criticized for its ambition. The website describes it as, “a community where racial and cultural connections are consciously uplifted...a place to take a deliberate pause and feed your mind, body and soul...a space for art, culture and politics to intentionally collide...we believe that by creating such a space we can inspire social change and begin to transform our community and the world.”

Created by artist and activist Andy Shallal and named for famous poet and busboy Langston Hughes (who resided and worked in the neighborhood 1930s), Busboys and Poets reaches beyond the confines of its retail space acting as a bookstore, restaurant, community center, art gallery, and theater.109


Standing as a “model for diversity,” according to Research Magazine, “any given day, people of all races, genders, sexual orientations, and generation spend time at busboys and poets.” It is this success in creating an inclusive space or atmosphere that is unique and worth noting. Derek Hyra, professor of urban affairs and planning at Virginia Tech, states that, “Andy has succeeded in creating an atmosphere where no one feels threatened. Places like Busboys & Poets in a racially diverse, gentrifying neighborhoods are important because they foster meaningful social interactions across differences and can ease tensions in transitioning communities.”

However, looking back to its opening, the reception was not totally warm. Before it first opened, Shallal was criticized as “yet another interloper in a once-black neighborhood that had crossed the line of revitalization into gentrification.” Some residents claimed Shallal was trying to "drive out poor black people" and that his intentions were focused on profit and change. Some said his goal was to shut down the Reeves Recovery Center, a facility across for the new restaurant that held meetings for drug and alcohol addicts. The very fact that before opening, the business was met with these kinds of accusations proves that “what the neighborhood needed was not another hip gathering spot with neon-colored, double-digit-priced drinks. What it needed was a place that grappled with the changes in the area--and the fears they engendered among blacks and whites alike.” What Shallal brought was not quite a restaurant, not quite a community center. What he hoped for was, “a vibrant and inclusive meeting place that might bridge the old U Street with the new U Street.” In fact, Shallal's early designs of

111 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
the space had “discrete areas--discussion rooms--to bring groups of people together to talk, debate, and argue.”\(^{115}\)

Shallal told a reporter that before opening Busboys and Poets he engaged in "trench work,” which consisted of methodical outreach much like the outreach conducted for this proposal and also by the Shaw Heritage trail and many community or neighborhood museums.

> “He understood the difficulty of establishing credibility among people skeptical of your motives. It could not be done with a broad brush; it required a hundred, a thousand, little flicks of the pen.”

> -Washingtonian

Before opening Shallal made important moves to gain the trust or at least reduce the skepticism of his deciders and of longtime residents alike. For example he financed his restaurant through local, Black-owned Industrial Bank; allowed Teaching for Change to run their bookstore in the restaurant free of rent until they turned a profit; he met with community leaders, businessmen, politicians, advisory groups, churches, schools, and radio stations. He was cautious about his invocation of history agonizing over the name hoping to find one that would resonate with the African American community but, would not appear to co opt that history to attempt legitimacy.

> “Success would be measured by an almost immeasurable goal: whether the place could succeed in defusing the racial tensions of the neighborhood and, in so doing, create order and harmony out of seemingly unbridgeable differences.”\(^{116}\)

\(^{115}\) Ibid.

\(^{116}\) Ibid.
In an interview with Washingtonian, he even addressed the issue of his own guilt. When the reporter told him he sounded guilt ridden, “He didn't refute it, acknowledging that his ‘overt guilt’ was driving the project. ‘I build guilt into my process,’ he said. ‘It works. Guilt has its place.’”\textsuperscript{117} To Shallal, the changes in U St were different from previous iterations in the 1990s, that it was more and more difficult to “knit together people of different backgrounds and sensibilities in a single community. Also more and more necessary.”\textsuperscript{118} It is his belief in the power of a restaurant or a gathering place to bring a community together that was his driving force.

\begin{quote}
\textit{“The dispossessed doubted his motives, and the comfortable scorned his high-mindedness.”}\textsuperscript{119}
\end{quote}

-Washingtonian

Despite his efforts and good intentions, it was inevitable that Busboys and Poets was met with criticism and skepticism. The experience proves that there are deeper issues that exist and cannot be resolved through conscientious and well-intentioned community forming spaces. But it also proves their necessity, that in order to begin to understand or mend those deeper issues, spaces that challenge and construct mindful approaches to community conversations are absolutely part of the equation. And while restaurants, community centers, or museums cannot do more than their best; they can pave the way for the next iteration that gets closer to the goal.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[117] Ibid.
\item[118] Ibid.
\item[119] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
Anacostia Art Gallery

The Anacostia Art Gallery is visible from the parking lot of the Anacostia Community Museum. Operating out of a home, it specializes in selling art pieces by African and African American artists and recently celebrated its 1-year anniversary. After visiting the Anacostia Community Museum one day this past summer I decided to see what the art gallery was all about, drawn in by the vibrant mural facade.

Neighbors stood outside talking to the owner, there was a very welcoming and casual atmosphere that seemed counter to the sign that read “Art Gallery.” Walking inside the house now gallery was like being transported to another space and time. Every surface was painted a bright color and the artwork covered the walls and every part of the creaking floor. Walking through was an experience in itself as the owner pointed out pieces, their history, their artists, their meaning, not letting me once feel like I could not ask a question, or that I did not belong. Moving to the backyard, party tents were getting ready to be taken down. The gallery just hosted a barbeque with food trucks and local jazz musicians, which according to the owner had a great turnout and was a blast. Even with the skeleton of the event left, you could feel the energy of what had occurred the night before. Farther back was an ancestral garden with statues and plants from all around the world. No labels told you what each figure meant or where it was from, but the message was clear, this was a place of reflection and honor.

The whole experience of the Anacostia Art Gallery was eye opening in that the energy transmitted by the physical space and the “welcomeness” it offered will be key elements in the proposed exhibition. Leaving the stone, aluminum, and formal museum quality of the Anacostia Community Museum and entering the warm, vibrant home that housed this eclectic and beautiful art gallery could not have made this clearer.

Location is Not Everything: Anacostia Community Museum

Fig 10 Anacostia Community Museum Quilt Exhibition &
Fig 11 Anacostia Art Gallery

Fig 12 Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, Smithsonian Institution
Much like the Reginald F Lewis Museum, the Anacostia Community Museum currently balances a mission focused on the community and telling the larger African American story. The Anacostia Community Museum gives precedents for how a community museum can successfully engage a neighborhood, but it also gives a clearer understanding of how tenuous that success is through its shifting focus and failure to maintain its relationships. It lends weight to the argument for having the exhibition at a location that is established in the community and rejects the institutional architecture of traditional museum spaces.

From its founding it was the only museum in the region that dedicated itself to the study and preservation of African American history and culture. At a museum conference in Aspen Colorado in 1966, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, S. Dillon Ripley, began to propose new ways the institution might “might establish and operate an experimental Neighborhood Museum in... a low-income neighborhood in Washington, D.C.”121 The creation of the Anacostia Community Museum really came for the efforts of Greater Anacostia Peoples (GAP), an active community group working for a thriving Anacostia. The Smithsonian saw an opportunity to reach beyond the National Mall and create a smaller, experimental space that connected with the local inner-city community. The museum opened its door (a converted cinema) on September 15, 1967 to a festival like atmosphere with the sound of a jazz band playing in the adjacent lot next to the building. In less than a year from its opening the museum was heralded as a role model for the “new museum.” 122

122 Ibid., 218
“Museums have a responsibility and the opportunity to enhance the way that we perceive ourselves, the manner in which we interact socially and culturally.”

- John Kinard, Anacostia Neighborhood Museum

However, in my interview with Joshua Gorman, collections manager at the Anacostia Community Museum, he outlined where the museum is now, which is a far cry from its beginnings. Like all of D.C., Anacostia was devastated by the crack epidemic. Violence, drugs, and poverty marked the Anacostia neighborhood as a place not to go and removed the museum away from its aim of addressing community needs. Joshua states that, “once the museum moved to its new location, the focus became more on African American history, rather than community driven. At the time, it was the only place doing that. There was a push from the more middle class stakeholders in the community to educate the lower-income newcomers, but eventually those people left and the community fell to drugs.”

Portia James documents this shift when he quotes the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum Report conducted by a panel of museum professionals in 1979:

“The fundamental objective of this type of facility is to be a ‘window to a larger world.’ While it would not ignore the local community as a subject of exhibit or other programs, its primary focus would be on subjects and themes largely unknown to the community which may be ‘isolated’ by virtue of its location, income level, or racial composition...”

Again James writes “lack of viable employment, economic recession, proliferation of drugs, and the resulting increase in crime, all began to take a toll on museum

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123 Ibid., 220.
visitation—and on participation in museum activities... By 1982, internal museum literature was referring to the museum’s inner-city location as a handicap.”

The original location of the museum, in the converted cinema, became the open area drug market of D.C. and the push to move the museum grew. In 1987 the museum moved a mile away to a public park area. Now the museum was no longer surrounded by drug activity, but also no longer allowed for casual walk-in visitors. Once again removing itself from the neighborhood it was meant to engage. While preservation and safety were paramount issues for the museum to tackle, the move looked, to most residents still active, as abandonment. The look of the first exhibitions in the new space reflected its modern architecture, sophisticated lighting, and new integrated audiovisual installations. At this point the community involvement in the Anacostia Community Museum was nonexistent.  

According to Joshua Gorman, the museum is and has been, making efforts to realign with community and refocus its mission. However, in the struggle for resources from the larger Smithsonian Institution, and the restraint on non-activist, nonpolitical content has made it difficult. Gorman noted that the museum has made efforts to hold programming outside of the museum building and in fact is working with community member to host a panel discussion on the possible redevelopment of Barry Farms a hot button issues east of the river where the fear of gentrification and displacement is high.

**Good Show, Bad Scene: Harlem on my Mind**

Less than two weeks after its opening, *Harlem on My Mind* had lines around the block, protesters behind police barricades, the city council threatening to halt funding, and a catalogue declared anti-Semitic and pulled from the shelves. The exhibit, in its

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126 Ibid., 31.
127 Ibid.
attempts to display an evocative history honoring Harlem’s past, caused an outpouring of anger and protest from Harlem residents and artists, the New York Jewish community, and the art elite alike.\textsuperscript{128} Though it opened in 1969, the exhibit stands as a model of how museums, even with the best intentions, can miss the mark on contemporary issues and alienate audiences. The key point of failure lies in the designer/producers, Allon Schoener’s, fixation on what he saw as progressive and revolutionary design at the cost of content and Harlem residents’ input.

The show opened in January 1969, following one of the most explosive years in America’s history. The exhibition was meant to showcase African American culture through a “multimedia communication environment” including large blown up photographs, recordings of speeches and jazz music, films, text cubes with newspaper articles reproduced, and slide projectors. It was something that had never been done before at a major art institution and, as Director of the Met, Thomas Hoving, put it, “it was an unusual event, particularly at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” He hoped, “some people will see it, read it, listen to it, and their lives and minds and bodies will change for the better.”\textsuperscript{129}

To attempt to confront race relations through cutting edge and controversial exhibit design in New York City, at that time was not only bold, but also misguided. Tensions were rising in Harlem with the decentralization of schools, and increased racism and anti-Semitism between urban Jewish and Black communities in NY and particularly in Harlem. Despite this powder keg Hoving decided to take on the show and embrace Schoener’s vision of an exhibit that declares “there is an urban black culture in

\textsuperscript{128} Schoener, Allon. “‘Madness at the Met…’ – An excerpt from George Magazine, January 1999.” Accessed April 21, 2014. \url{http://www.allonschoener.com/harlem_george.htm}

America. Harlem is its capital.”\textsuperscript{130} Despite its hostile reception by the public, \textit{Harlem on My Mind} was in fact, an innovative and expansive exhibit that highlighted the amazing cultural contributions of African American culture through the lens of Harlem. Unfortunately, it was at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and without genuine input from the community it was supposed to be honoring.

Following a year like 1968, the \textit{Harlem on My Mind} exhibit became a flashpoint in the fight for self-agency in the Black community and despite its intentions to be collaborative it was viewed as another form of exploitation. The Met underestimated the rawness still equated with the current climate politically and socially in Harlem. Reflecting on the show Schoener writes, “These were heady times for the New York white community. Anything seemed possible; everything was being questioned; experimentation was rampant.”\textsuperscript{131} In this retrospective look at the show, Schoener is honest; self aware, and critical of his decisions, but still maintains his aims were genuine. In examining his motivations behind his controversial decisions, one can begin to understand how good intentions can often fall short when clouded by other interests. In his commitment to his design goals, he made some naïve choices that would spark controversy and limit the exhibit’s ability to be appreciated or understood. One critic stated that this blind devotion to the experience was a “triumph of form delivered at the expense of content.”\textsuperscript{132} One significant issue raised with the \textit{Harlem on My Mind} was that black local artists were excluded and promises of supplemental exhibits of black artists at the Met were never upheld. These decisions ultimately cost him buy-in from the Harlem community and led to protests and the formation of the Emergency Black Cultural Coalition, a group of Black and White artists, specifically formed to protest the

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
Outside the Met the EBCC carried signs saying, “Soul’s Been Sold Again!!!” and “That’s White of Hoving!” His decision sent a message, even if unintended, that the Met “didn’t think paintings or sculptures by black artists had a place in its galleries, even for a show about black culture.”

Many also accused Schoener of objectifying and romanticizing Harlem. He chose to “construct an atmosphere that would recreate the way he experienced Harlem from his position of privilege.” His choice to use photographs and not artwork done in the community, by the community was the last nail in the coffin for many Harlemites, who felt that they had no voice. “As if they were unable to represent themselves, Harlem residents were interpreted through the Met and packaged as a cultural object.” This exhibit ignited already festering frustrations and feelings of alienation and betrayal by “white” institutions. Allon alludes to his shortsightedness, but justifies his decision in the 1995 edition of the catalogue: “Looking back, I realize that as much as I wanted to create an exhibition about Harlem, I wanted to demonstrate new ideas about how museums could become information environments that inundated people with images and sounds rather than artifacts.”

In organizing the show Schoener sought out African Americans and residents of Harlem, including the Harlem Cultural Council, to help as advisors. In the end many of the members of the advisory committee did not feel like their input was valued and did not agree with the direction of the show, especially the decision not to include artwork. That early criticism set the tone for how the show was to be received by the media and

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136 Cooks, Bridget, 17.
137 Ibid., 21.
138 Schoener, Allon.
community organizations. In fact, the executive director of the HCC, Ed Taylor, met with the press prior to the shows opening and stated, “We’re expected simply to be rubber stamps and window dressing.”

Schoener speaks frankly about this accusation years later:

“Although Ed Taylor was correct in saying we used members of the Harlem community as ‘rubber stamps and window dressing,’ this was not our original intention. Given the mood at the time, community participation was a genuine objective; implementing it was another matter. No one in the museum profession knew anything about community participation.”

As the Manhattan Tribune stated, “good show, bad scene.” Schoener and Hoving’s attempt to push the Met in a new direction was a valuable pursuit, but were misguided by lack of knowledge, lack of sensitivity to the events of the previous year and current climate in NY, and a desire to use new media in the museum to create a communication environment at the expense of genuine community backing.

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139 Cooks, Bridget, 25.
140 Schoener, Allon.
141 Ibid.
“Besides being ready in his information and studious in his use of research, he goes beyond the apparent to the real, beyond a part to a whole, beyond a truth to a more important truth.”

- Freeman Tilden, National Park Service

Exhibition Information

Building off of the extensive research detailed in the previous sections and the appendices, this section outlines the specific exhibition information including: mission, interpretive and design goals, visitor experience, and content of the proposed exhibition.

Mission Statement

The exhibition is about the links that connect us or barriers that disconnect us from each other. It is about the tenuous nature of shared experiences and the fragility of a place and time. It is about active remembering and sharing. Following the stories of real people, interconnected by race, time, and the neighborhood of Shaw, the exhibition will explore ideas of power, identity, and memory. Combating the shifting landscape of the neighborhood, this historic home will act as a site dedicated to preserving, exploring, and celebrating this neighborhood’s past.

Teaching Points & Experiential Goals

“Museums can help by giving us a sense of history that allows us to call upon our own experiences to interpret the past and to use that knowledge to shape and influence the future.”

-John Fleming, Cincinnati Museum

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142 Tilden, Freeman, R. Bruce Craig, and Russell E. Dickenson.
The exhibition will aim to:

1. engage visitors in “active remembering.” Creating a public space where history can act as a living legacy in the community.\(^{144}\)

2. allow visitors to experience Shaw’s complex, rich, and personal history of neighborhood through multigenerational dialogue and narrative space.

3. give visitors an understanding of the aesthetic of the 1970s and how it related to a new spirit of self-representation and self-determination and how that spirit was reflected in these Shaw residents’ stories.

**Executive Summary of Exhibition Content Outline**

![Content Diagram](image_url)

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\(^{144}\) Matero, Frank G. 160.
“Community museums have always existed in the black community, on street corners, in backyards, on stoops. It’s just that it’s a living museum.”

-Colin Carew, Museum for the People

This first exhibition in the newly renovated Carter G Woodson Historic House is a hybrid neighborhood museum and historic home. The exhibition will tell layered, compelling, and relatable stories based on real experiences in the community that will intrigue, engage, and resonate with visitors. In this proposed iteration and channeling the spirit of Carter G Woodson, the visitor will explore a history of Shaw through the lives of its African American residents, all connected, subtly or overtly, by a decade and a neighborhood. In doing so, the exhibit will act as a space for generations to engage in memory sharing.

While a solid baseline knowledge of the neighborhood will come from archival and academic research the content will be largely driven by community interviews and

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145 Harvey, Emily Dennis, and Bernard Friedberg, eds. 35.
conversations. As with this first exhibition and future exhibitions in this space, the focus on individual residents and their experience will require curators to identify and research past residents to represent in the exhibition narrative. This can be accomplished through oral history interviews, developing relationships with local businesses and organizations, and archival research. For the purposes of this proposal, the narrative below will act as a framework, within which the community advisory board can use in depth research to craft the authentic narratives. Each element of these stories are composed from interviews and surveys conducted with residents of Shaw and surrounding areas supported by extensive archival research previously in this proposal that will lay the foundation for the future narratives.

The exhibition will immerse visitors in one of the most unique decades in recent history; visitors will have a social space to share personal memories with family, friends, and each other. The built environment will play a key role in communicating the narratives of these residents, profiled below:

**Howard University Student:** Living in Shaw, she is a nursing student attending Howard University and working at Freedman’s Hospital (what is now Howard University Hospital). She is politically active, participating in Howard’s protests of the Vietnam War. She is up on DC’s music scene and loves jazz and attends productions by the DC Repertory. She attends the Kindness Day festival and she is starting to attend DC Black Panther meetings, frustrated by discrimination in she sees in DC. Leaning toward more national and radical approaches posters of Angela Davis, Kwame Ture, and James Brown cover her walls.

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146 Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture, and Eleanor Holmes Norton. 296.
147 Ibid. 298.
Students, including accounts of those at Howard University focused on national and even global politics because of the Vietnam War and movements like Black Power and Women's Liberation.\(^{148}\)

**Political Activist:** Local politics have never been more accessible to the DC community until the fight for Home Rule.\(^{149}\) In his 40s, he works tirelessly, campaigning for Julius Hobson (key founder of DC Statehood Party\(^{150}\)), fighting for Home Rule. He enjoys tuning into Petey Greene’s radio and TV show and has connections with local celebrities, scholars, and businessmen. He worked tirelessly during the 50s and 60s and marched for Civil Rights and sees the next avenue of opportunity in local politics.

**Member of Shiloh Baptist Church:** In her 70s, she has lived through changing times. Born in Alabama, her family moved to DC in the 1905 when she was just a young girl. She has seen Shaw prosper and now falter after the riots of 1968. She is active in her church, where plays the organ and leads a women’s group that works to support the less fortunate in the community.

**Child of the 70s:** He never misses an episode of Soul Train. Works weekends sweeping in his uncle’s shop, he is always listening in and absorbing the tall tales and neighborhood troubles from patrons. He attends the Ujamaa school (Ujamaa School is the oldest completely independent Afrikan-centered school in the United States, founded in 1968 by Dr. El Senzengakulu Zulu and located in Shaw\(^{151}\)) where he studies “Afrikan history and culture” in addition to his other subjects. He is on the precipice of adolescent and is growing out of playing with toys, but not quite yet and he still loves watching cartoons, and riding his bike around the city.

\(^{148}\) Ibid. 295.  
\(^{149}\) Ibid., 298.  
\(^{150}\) Ibid.  
**Funk, Go-go band Member:** Crashing in a cheap basement and playing music all over DC’s venues. The experience of the 1970s is one full of experimentation including that of music. DC is hot with a new style, taking funk to a whole new place. He is always listening to music and gaining inspiration from jazz, funk, and traditional African drums.

Visitors throughout the house encounter this content with each story being told in different rooms. The entrance on the first floor will lay the stage for the rest of the exhibit and hold images, newspaper clippings, family photos submitted by Shaw residents, and will capture the feeling of the 1970s in the neighborhood, both good and not so good. It will function as introduction to the 1970s through less politicized means: appliances, technology, decoration, family photos of the style, etc. and give an understanding of the time period. This will not only welcome the visitor, but the immersive environment will provide visual cues that they have been transported to another time.

**Challenges in Content**

“The people whose history you are commemorating often know more than the curators do, and they have something substantive to bring to the table... People feel ownership of their history, and there can be tension and resentment if someone comes in and says, 'I'm going to tell your story.'”

-W. Richard West, NMAI

The major challenge in exhibiting the content is one of balance. Understanding that there must be a balance between information that is true and authentic while at the

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same time, using the power of imagination to create cohesive narrative to achieve learning and experiential goals. Balancing the presentation of events and facts that may be upsetting with the creation of a safe and comfortable space for neighborhood residents is important to learn and discuss issues past and present.

In DC, in particular, there were the events of the 1968 riots and the subsequent decline of the neighborhood after the destruction of local business many of which chose not to reinvest that must be addressed. Expressing that anger in a way that is too graphic, explicit, or inflammatory may open old wounds for those who lived through them or alienate other audiences. Also the exhibit could be perceived as insensitive or exploitative if the focus fell too heavily on the more sensational and controversial aspects of the time. That is why telling the true experience of the represented residents in a way that never confuses the past with the present constructed environment is so important. Additionally, allowing visitors to contribute their own voice to the narrative will give neighborhood residents, past and present, ownership of the stories the space tell.

Exhibition Design Concept and Look & Feel

“He never forgot that the feeling of an exhibit and the need for it to tell a story were quite as important as its factual truthfulness.”

-Freeman Tilden, National Park Service

In the words of George C Wolfe, American playwright and director: “My theory about theater is that everything you do either serves the play or distract from it. You’ve got to make sure that every source lends energy to the story you’re telling. Everything

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[153] Tilden, Freeman, R. Bruce Craig, and Russell E. Dickenson. 27
matters. Nothing is wasted.” Similarly, the design of the exhibition will play an essential role in striking the necessary balance between authenticity, narrative, reflection, and engagement. Beyond content, story, and even location, the details of the design will be the unifying thread that creates a cohesive message.

The concept behind the design is centered on the idea of a “still life” and how layers of objects and textures can tell a personal story. The overall aesthetic will be eclectic, intimate, and homelike with designed spaces that create curiosity, conversation, and recognition for visitors. It will be welcoming and immediately recognizable as a Shaw home in the 1970s through real and abstracted elements indicative of the time. Playing off of the traditional model of a house museum, it will have narrative spaces and vignettes with visible layers of time that communicate the personal stories of the lives of these neighborhood residents, stringing together graphically and through narrative the stable and tenuous connections they share.

It will depart from the traditional house museum by removing barriers or ropes between the visitor and the exhibit, adding noise and music, featuring elements of interaction, and perhaps most significantly, it will provide opportunities for community members and organizations or schools to contribute to or alter the content. The space is meant to put the visitor at ease, but also engage curiosity and excitement. It will avoid aspects of traditional museum spaces or historic homes that can seem cold or formal including stanchions or barriers, formal furniture or antiques, and emphasis on the importance of the residence rather than their human elements. Focusing on famous patrons or formal architecture often interests visitors on a superficial level, but they

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subsequently have a hard time connecting on a deeper level that is relevant to their lives.\footnote{Pustz, Jennifer. 8.}

The lighting, materials, furniture, and decor of the house will reflect the time period. Because the exhibition is built in a home the layout and furnishings will coordinate with the architectural structure as well as serve as period pieces to communicate the aesthetic of the 1970s. Some of the furnishings will be physical historic objects, while others will be fabricated, or will be abstracted or graphically represented. This layered approach will help communicate the story in an engaging way, while at the same time, never assumes the responsibility of true authenticity, which can never be achieved and should not be attempted in this type of exhibition.

From the street, the buildings facades will be painted with a temporary mural done by a local artist, that reflects the character of the neighborhood and the layered history of the house itself. With each new exhibit that explores the history and life of Shaw’s residents a new mural will be commissioned. This will immediately attract passerby, but will not seem out of place in the Shaw-U Street Corridor, which is home to many murals including the famously repainted Marvin Gaye mural that had overwhelming community support when the original was covered up by a new building. The use of the mural on the home’s facade will introduce visitors to the concept that this is a staged and recreated space used to communicate layered history. It will also reinforce the idea that this is a community space that can be altered, added to, and organized how the community sees fit.

One major consideration in designing any exhibition is the space constraints. The space has many advantages as well as some challenges. Luckily, the National Park Service will be conducting a full, historically conscious renovation that will meet ADA requirements. The structure, however, is composed of two adjoining row houses that
dictate the layout of the space. For the purposes of this exhibition, the house will be emphasized instead of ignored. The hope is that the exhibit, at most times, is crowded and it feels alive with activity. Design elements such as ambient noise, projection mapping, and music will help to supplement and encourage visitor activity.

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**Fig. 15 Initial Concept Sketches**

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**Interpretive Plan**

"The construction of a spatial montage that never confuses the present with the past yet allows visitors an open-ended experience of history, memory, and time."\(^{156}\)

-Frank Matero, *Interpretation, Experience, and the Past*

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\(^{156}\) Matero, Frank G. 159.
The above quote and figure reference Franklin Court Independence National Historic Park in Philadelphia that “recreates” a historical structure, space, and time through design elements that focus the visitors experience on the historical and aesthetic authenticities through both real and abstracted elements. This unique approach has stood the test of time, still capable of engaging visitors almost forty years after its opening.

“the brilliance and success of the design solution lay not only in the diversity, placement, and juxtaposition of the site’s interpretive components (both archaeological remains and ‘interpreted’ features) but in the recognition that the original hidden enclave setting of the Franklin site could offer up a powerful experience that brought time and space together in an urban oasis appreciated in Franklin’s time as well.”

This proves that in some cases, using means of “open-interpretation” that is less literal can be successful in engaging visitors.

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157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
Based on research of Shaw’s history, audience, and the specific site interpretation taken on by the exhibition, the key goals of the interpretive plan will be to facilitate memory-sharing and storytelling through physical objects and material culture, provide a social space for remembering and honoring this neighborhoods vernacular history, and communicate the look and feel of the 1970s through the lens of peoples’ experience in Shaw. These will be achieved through the built environment, which like Franklin Court, does not attempt to trick the visitor into confusing past and present.

Strategies for accomplishing this experience will include abstraction, personification of cultural expressions by the built environment, audio visual media, “analog” interactives, immersive environments, and strategic use of lighting and ambient noise. By the very nature of the exhibition space, which is layered in time and experience, the goal of the interpretation is to directly engage with the community to give voice to their story through a space open to community curators.

In using this interpretive plan it is essential that a balance be struck between “personification” in order to distance the visitor from more difficult or controversial or emotional content, and authenticity to avoid generalizations and also create content that resonates with visitors. That is where abstraction and symbolism will come into play. By abstracting the environment the visitor will understand the larger metaphor of the house and its “family members,” and consume content in a way that is personal and informed by their own experience. The goal is to communicate this idea of “home, personal, intimate,” while also communicating broad diverse ideas about the neighborhoods history and the recognition that it is vital to preserve. All the while keeping in mind that, “the visitor’s chief interest is in whatever touches his personality, his experiences, and his ideals.”

Strategies would include levels of information that engage a number of

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159 Tilden, Freeman, R. Bruce Craig, and Russell E. Dickenson. 36.
different learning styles, Howard Gardner’s categories of learning: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.  

Using the example of Franklin Court, some of the furniture, appliances, and home ephemera will actually be graphically represented or abstracted rather than exist in the house. The first reason being the need to “deconstruct” the house in order to cue audiences that this is a “designed” experience, not a literal translation of this home in the 1970s. It will allow them to examine their own stories and experience in addition to those being shared in the house. Creating that boundary of “art” vs. “life” will allow visitors to remove themselves from the direct experience if it tends to hit “too close to home,” and removes the voice of the museum as claiming universal knowledge. Thirdly, and more practically, the space will not allow for a fully furnished house. To accommodate accessibility, and to allow for comfortable view of the exhibit the elements that will help “set the scene” will be flattened and represented graphically.

**Design Narrative:**

The exhibit spans two adjoined row houses and four floors including a basement level. The basement level is dedicated to the music of Shaw in the 1970s. The first floor and entry level will introduce the visitor to the exhibition and to Shaw’s history and the major events of the 1970s. The second floor will highlight 3 of Shaw’s most important institutions: Howard University, the Shiloh Baptist Church, and the Ujamaa School. The third floor will act as a permanent neighborhood archive and provide a meeting space for local groups. This gives the community a place to store, record, and preserve the neighborhood’s history and establishes the house as an active space to be used by residents.

From the street, it is clear that the historic site has fallen into disrepair.

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Upon it’s reopening I am proposing that the non-historic building, 1542, be painted with a mural commissioned from a local artist. Murals have a long tradition in the Shaw neighborhood and will attract visitors to this residential area. On the adjoining building, portraits of residents from the 1970s will look out on the street from the large windows. These portraits connect the two spaces and separate them from the historic house and again draw in visitors.

Visitors enter the exhibition on the first floor. This area will introduce them to the process of collecting and donating artifacts as well as introduce them to Shaw’s history. This space is the most interactive of the four floors in order to draw visitors in. The first interactive area is the Now & Then interactive that allows visitors to explore images of Shaw, past and present, through the popular 1970s toy—The View-Master. Visitors are encouraged to record thoughts and feelings about the changes they see which will be added to the neighborhood archive on the third floor. The next interactive is the Oral history video. Here visitors can locate a story on the map, connecting people and stories with places, press the tablet and begin a larger projection of the video on the wall. This jump in scale from the tablet scale to the wall scale will encourage communal viewing and conversation among visitors. Additionally, on this floor is a wall of community-donated items that tells the story of Home Rule. Moving farther back there is a projection mapped family table, which will have low levels of ambient noise of cooking, talking, and gathering. Visitors will watch as family members pass newspapers, celebrate Kwanza, and share meals.

Moving to the basement level, visitors will be immersed in the sounds of Shaw in the 1970s. Walking down the stairs they will be greeted by a bright neon sign that says “Say it Loud”, referencing James Brown’s famous song: Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud. This bold statement embodies the attitude of the time. Washington, DC & Shaw have a rich musical history from Duke Ellington to Marvin Gaye to Chuck Brown the
godfather of GO-GO. This section honors and celebrates that heritage by allowing visitors to lounge, explore, and listen to the powerful music of the time.

On the 2nd floor visitors will encounter stories about 3 major institutions in Shaw that thrived in the 1970s and are still thriving today: Howard University, Shiloh Baptist Church, and the Ujamaa School. These places were the most frequently mentioned in surveys and conversations I had. They also host social and cultural events that bring back longtime residents who have since moved away from the neighborhood, providing an important link to the area.

The first and largest section on this floor is a room of a Howard University Student. Founded in Shaw in 1867, Howard is one of this country’s oldest and most prestigious Historically Black Colleges or University. Along the facing wall will be items donated by Howard alumni from 1970-1979. Throughout all the community walls there will be blank spaces that provide continuous opportunities for residents to contribute to the display. Being transparent about the gaps in the collection will reinforced the message that the museum is built by the community and leaves room for the audience’s voice. It will also allow visitors to reflect on how their experiences add to the story and even give them the opportunity to donate artifacts that can be then added in real time.

The next area is dedicated to the Shiloh Baptist Church. From surveys and conversations that I had with people it became apparent that going to church is the #1 reason why past residents return to the neighborhood. This area tells the story of one of Shiloh’s members and recounts the role of the church in the civil rights movement. Highlighting the struggles of the civil rights generation connects well to the next section that tells the story of a child that grew up in the 1970s and attended the Afrocentric Ujamaa School. Founded in 1968 it is the area’s oldest Afrocentric School and hosts the longest running Kwanza celebration in the country. This child’s room reflects the influences and shifts in popular culture balanced with the influences and teachings of the
Lastly on the 3rd floor there will be a neighborhood archive and meeting space. Through partnerships with other DC history stakeholders like the Historical Society of Washington, DC, Shaw Main Streets, and the DC Public Library, residents can donate artifacts to the collection, record oral histories, or research their own story. Upon entering the third floor visitors are met with a wall of keys, each inscribed with the name of someone who donated to the exhibition. This wall represents the ownership and access that the museum offers to longtime residents through the preservation of the neighborhood’s history. Additionally, the open space will function as a meeting place for local groups. This establishes the house as a physical gathering place for community members and continually connects the house with the issues and concerns of the neighborhood.

Our Stories aims to create a space for residents that confronts the issues of gentrification through preservation, interpretation, and education. It hopes to give voice to residents who often feel ignored or dismissed in the midst of rapid change. It hopes to give ownership to those in the community who want to preserve and celebrate Shaw’s rich history.
“I certainly agree that museums may not be able to contribute to the resolution of many of our global problems, but museums are in a position to invent a new future for themselves and their communities.”

-Museums in a Dangerous Time

Conclusion

We do not live in a post-racial America. If the events and protests in New York, Washington, DC, and Ferguson, MO tell us anything it’s that the lines between black and white exist and they show themselves in our justice system, in our economic institutions, and in the makeup of our gentrifying neighborhoods. What role can historic homes and sites play in combating these divisions?

“Cultural institutions should and can function as integral rather than isolated sources of the style and energy of people.”

-Edward Spriggs, Museum for the People

Heritage centers, historic homes, museums all have a place at the table when it comes to neighborhood planning. Their voice should be loudest in changing neighborhoods, where so much real and perceived loss is felt so quickly and so completely. Site-specific interpretation at historic homes like the Carter G Woodson house can offer these changing communities a complex reading of history that honors and preserves their experiences and heritage.

John Kinard, founding director of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum stated that, “a community museum must speak to the needs, hopes, the disgusts, and the

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161 “Museums in a Dangerous Time.” Center for the Future of Museums, June 24, 2014. futureofmuseums.blogspot.com/2014/06/museums...
162 Harvey, Emily Dennis, and Bernard Friedberg, eds. 5.
163 Matero, Frank G.. 157.
desires of the people within close geographical boundaries to the center itself.”

Through research and outreach it is clear that gentrification, with all of its complexities and contradictions, is the major issue that affects members of the Shaw community. While this exhibition may not cure the ills associated with this rapid redevelopment, it plays an essential role in anchoring the Carter G Woodson house in the community and neighborhood.

The research and project development done for this exhibition proposal also reveals the complexities and nuances associated with attempting this type of exhibition, as an “outsider.” Through out this project, I’ve had many conversations with many different people. Some of these conversations were exciting and fun, many were eye opening, and some were awkward and uncomfortable. All of them lead me to the understanding that there is a real and tangible divide in the Shaw neighborhood, which can be viewed as a microcosm of the society we live in today.

Edward Spriggs, former Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem spoke to the 1969 Neighborhood Museum seminar passionately about the role and failure of museums. He challenged the room to “take me to a museum and show me myself, show me my people, show me soul America.” Now, forty-five years later, with twelve museums dedicated to African American history and culture in the DC area and a Smithsonian on the National Mall, let us turn some attention back to the historic neighborhoods and communities. As changes come rapidly to homes and businesses, the vision of Edward Spriggs is as important today and tomorrow as the day he first said it in 1969. As the field progresses further and further into uncharted territory around the nation, do not forget the role that a community museum can play in celebrating and preserving the neighborhoods that make our cities historic.

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164 Harvey, Emily Dennis, and Bernard Friedberg, eds. 27.
164 Ibid., xi.
165 Ibid.
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