

ForumJournal

VOL. 32, NO. 4

Intangible Heritage



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation
Leadership Forum**

Engaging Communities to Identify Intangible Heritage in Minneapolis

MICHAEL TOLAN

A few months ago, at a neighborhood meeting in Northeast Minneapolis, a prospective business owner came to pitch his idea for a nightclub. Neighborhood meetings here are typically an orderly gathering of the usual suspects—some homeowners, a few business owners—but this meeting drew a standing-room-only crowd. The entrepreneur didn't make it very far into his presentation before the barrage of questions came. The meeting swiftly descended into pandemonium, with the flustered presenter standing by, as community members turned their barbs upon each other, some thrilled by the prospect of a new business, others distressed about traffic, parking shortages, and noise.

To him, his idea must have seemed like a natural fit—a sensible next step in Northeast Minneapolis' evolution from quiet working-class industrial neighborhood to artistic haven to premiere hipster locale. To the community, it struck a nerve. The proposal epitomized the struggle between so-called growth and so-called preservation;

Intangible heritage, like a legacy of diversity and immigration, rarely has a fixed address but defines a community's identity.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL TOLAN



between gentrifiers and gentrified; long-time homeowners and new renters; artists and developers. Beneath the brouhaha lay a fierce tug-of-war over community character.

At Rethos (formerly the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota), we've tried to position ourselves not as participants in this debate, but as facilitators of it. In Minneapolis, like many major cities across the country, change is happening—*fast*. The question is no longer about how to spur growth, but how to manage it. While conversations about community character spark fierce debate, a lack of consensus about the definition of community character often immobilizes these discussions from the onset. Our role has been to render the intangible tangible—not necessarily to generate policy, but to promote the conversations that precede it. And in doing so, we hope to reframe crucial discussions about intangible heritage and how communities can safeguard their future.

WHY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

In 2016 the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota received a grant from the McKnight Foundation to engage with communities in four Minneapolis neighborhoods to examine and determine their cultural assets.¹ It was an exciting opportunity to do innovative work—to perform the ever-elusive “proactive preservation.” We would have time and resources to build relationships with community members, investigate the importance of intangible heritage, and experiment with solutions to protect it based on local priorities.

This was a new initiative for the organization, and it felt crucially relevant. Communities in Minneapolis and across the country are currently facing rapid change and the prospect of physical and cultural displacement. This moment demands both novel strategies to address these challenges and space for communities to tell their stories in authentic ways. With a focus on the power of place, preservationists are uniquely equipped to lead this effort.

We approached the project with a loose conception of what intangible heritage or cultural assets might include. It could be physical places—historic or otherwise. But it could also be the businesses and critical community nonprofits that inhabit those

spaces. It might involve the experiences, memories, stories, traditions old and new, and other characteristics which define a place.

But the essence of the project was to provide a forum for communities to provide clarity and substance to our initial vision. While we could brainstorm in our offices what cultural heritage might mean to people or ways to protect it, we had no way of understanding of its depth and extent without their input. For this reason, we felt—and feel now, more than ever—that community engagement must be at the center of the movement to protect intangible heritage. A grassroots approach enables us to learn about what truly matters to communities and reveals opportunities for solutions grounded in how people connect to places. Furthermore, engaging communities in discussions about intangible heritage empowers *them* to advocate for these tools. Unfortunately, there is a widespread sentiment among communities that they don't have the authority or agency to advocate for cultural heritage. We believe engagement can address that assumption.

And so while we had bold visions of the power of community engagement and recognized it as integral to the future success of the preservation movement, we—like many preservation organizations, I suspect—had absolutely no idea how to do it.

BUILDING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FROM THE GROUND UP

Our community engagement initiative emerged out of ongoing conversations with neighborhood leaders from the four Minneapolis neighborhoods. They all expressed interest in preserving their historical and cultural legacies, but traditional preservation tactics could not fully support their goals of protecting intangible heritage. The need for new tools was readily apparent. Our initial funding stemmed from the need to address this gap, and we selected the four neighborhoods as locations to conduct our work.

We had audacious aspirations of facilitating community meetings and convening conversations to build consensus about the value of cultural heritage assets. That work, apparently, does not happen overnight. Beyond a loose network of relationships, we lacked the connections that could support our efforts.



The Cedar-Riverside Multicultural Dinner highlights the diversity of the neighborhood.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL TOLAN

We remain deeply thankful to the McKnight Foundation for providing the opportunity for us to develop relationships and to experiment with a truly organic approach. Recognizing that not every organization will have the same flexibility, I want to outline four major strategies we relied on to build a new community engagement initiative and discuss the lessons we've learned about preserving intangible heritage: Establishing a Presence, Engaging Communities on Creative Terms, Meeting People Where They Are, and Building Authentic Relationships.

ESTABLISHING A PRESENCE

First and foremost, we made ourselves consistently available. It sounds obvious, but we understood that no one knew who we were, and no one would ever find out if we worked from our offices eight miles away in downtown St. Paul. During the days, we worked in local coffee shops. During the evenings, we attended neighborhood association meetings. Especially in the beginning, we didn't discriminate about what types of meetings we attended—the simple presence of community members was enough to draw us there. If we weren't immediately relevant to locals, we would make ourselves relevant by our regular presence.

Over time, as our network of relationships grew, we found this to be particularly effective. New relationships grew out of serendipitous encounters. Once, we made plans to speak with a longtime regular at Palmer's Bar, an iconic dive bar that's been a Cedar-Riverside neighborhood landmark for over a century. Before he arrived, another Palmer's regular decided he wanted to chat too. Over time, more regular patrons approached us wanting to tell

their stories. We gathered much richer information than expected, all because we showed up (it probably didn't hurt that we bought them a few drinks for their time).

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES ON CREATIVE TERMS

We all know that preservation jargon can fail to resonate with others. Asking people about their favorite cultural assets or intangible heritage will likely elicit confused stares. But we found that a simpler question, like “what are your favorite places in the neighborhood?” isn't a whole lot better. These direct questions overwhelm and force people to think in unfamiliar ways. Preservationists are passionate about places and actively think about how they shape their lives. Others have that passion too, but it's not as top-of-mind.

Questions about experiences—rather than preferences—proved much more inviting. We held unstructured conversations, as opposed to formal interviews, and asked questions that anyone might be accustomed to answering, like “What was your first experience coming to the neighborhood?” We always wanted to know how a place facilitates an experience, but it was never the role of community members to say that explicitly. Instead, we created a setting in which someone might be comfortable sharing that information indirectly.

We used some creative techniques to get people talking. We relied heavily on an adaptation of “[Place It!](#)”, an activity developed by James Rojas. We asked participants to abstractly represent their favorite places, stories, and memories from the neighborhood using a collection of found objects we provided. Talking about

these ideas can be difficult; building them out of toys and other assorted objects breaks down those mental barriers and stimulates a free-flowing conversation about culture.



Place It! helps communities think creatively about place. Here, a Cedar-Riverside youth builds the Riverside Plaza building where she lives.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL TOLAN

MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

We were also intentional about the places where we engaged people. Neighborhood meetings provided a good venue for building relationships. We wanted to reach non-participating, disenfranchised groups too, though. To do so, we abided by the principle of meeting people where they are, rather than expecting them to come to pre-arranged, potentially intimidating meetings. We talked to people at block parties, businesses, and even on the street.

In Logan Park, the center of the Northeast Minneapolis Arts District, we felt comfortable wandering into artist studios and other businesses to speak with owners and customers. If they were busy, we set up times to come back and have more in-depth conversations.

In Cedar-Riverside, a heavily East African neighborhood, we learned this spontaneous approach might be considered intrusive. So we built trust and relationships with community leaders who then provided access to a broader network. They invited us to attend existing events, like the Cedar-Riverside Multicultural Dinner which celebrates the neighborhood's diversity and draws a broad cross-section of the community. We could never have independently organized anything of its scale and reach, and we engaged people there—especially youth—whom we never would have been able to speak to otherwise.

BUILDING AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Establishing trust with the community often meant working on projects only tangentially related to documenting heritage. That's because meaningful engagement requires a commitment to the community's needs—not just to your vision of what the community needs. Authentic engagement isn't about marketing your group, drawing more people to your events, or increasing awareness about your work. It's about developing a better understanding of how to orient your expertise to meet the priorities of the community.

In Cedar-Riverside, we collaborated with local leaders to develop a program called Building Power. The inspiration behind the initiative was to equip youth with training to combat racial injustice and become vocal community advocates. Each weekly

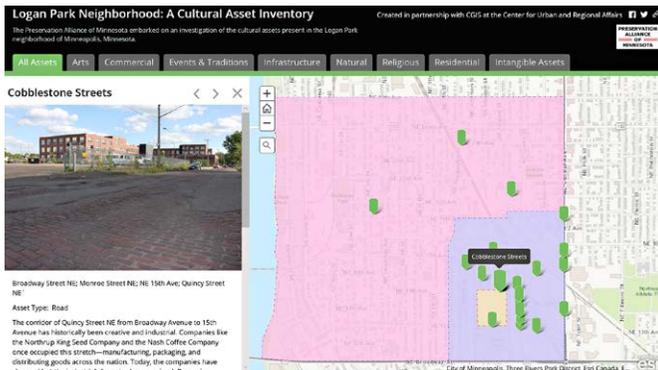
session featured leadership development training and an outside speaker who spoke on topics such as criminal justice reform and white supremacy.

Initially, we became involved with Building Power to lead discussion on topics like gentrification. Even though that never happened, we view our participation as immensely important. We played a role in preparing youth to become better civic leaders. We also built stronger relationships with neighborhood activists. These connections allowed us to access a broader network of people and better serve the neighborhood. Building Power helped us understand the community's priorities, needs, and issues, independent of our own project. Our involvement allowed us to recast our work to be more meaningful to the community.

DOCUMENTING INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Our experience engaging communities revealed the fascinating depth and breadth of intangible heritage. Sometimes intangible heritage is obvious. But sometimes, it's found in the quotidian, the overlooked, the mundane—the features that blend so seamlessly into a place that it becomes hard to untangle them from the place itself.

People mentioned familiar elements that corresponded with our expectations of intangible heritage: restaurants and other local businesses; parks and public squares; murals; festivals and other traditions. But on the ground, we found surprises and new insights. People talked about the value of physical places because of the memories they evoke and the opportunity they provide for intangible heritage to flourish. For example, a culture and history of accepting immigrants is important in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. Residents recognized the importance of certain buildings not because of any particular business that exists there currently, but because their affordability and location allow new immigrants to start their own businesses and thrive. We also found that people cited less-obvious elements of intangible heritage: railroads that bisect the neighborhood, a vacant lot that once held a historic performing arts center before it burned down, the basketball gym at the community center.



The GIS maps articulate what the community values, and why.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL TOLAN

Eighteen months of community engagement taught us that our greatest contribution didn't have to be compiling new research or offering up revelations about intangible heritage. Though we would've liked to, we also didn't have to solve gentrification or displacement. Rather, we came to see the importance of articulating a community's perspectives on intangible heritage in a communal, tangible way that enables productive discussion about neighborhood character.

Partnering with the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA), we created GIS maps for the [Logan Park](#), [Cedar-Riverside](#), and [Elliot Park](#) neighborhoods that depict the information we gathered. The maps include entries on notable cultural assets and contain stories, quotations, and photos. Each map considers assets that have fixed addresses, like mosques, businesses, and artist studios, as well as abstract neighborhood characteristics, like a "gritty" vibe or a history of immigration. The program we used, [StoryMaps](#), is a free, simple tool any organization can utilize.

None of this information is new. But the presentation is. The maps translate perspectives previously scattered across individual memories into a single, easily accessible location, allowing people to see how others experience culture. They give the sense that personal feelings are actually shared and collective while also offering new insights. They affirm the notion that intangible heritage exists, that it's worth fighting for, and that communities possess the power to advocate for it.

PRESERVATIONISTS AS AMBASSADORS OF PLACE

It is difficult to consider the prospect of developing a new system to preserve intangible heritage that parallels the one we've created for tangible, architectural heritage. This would necessitate somehow creating a unified theory of preserving sandwiches, festivals, and intersections. Such a system would presage many of the same criticisms of traditional historic preservation: its heavy-handedness and lack of applicability to what matters most about a place.

These concerns elevate the need for community engagement—for understanding intangible heritage through the lens of communities. Creating a tangible record of that cultural heritage establishes a common language. It allows communities and policymakers to discuss the present and future of local heritage.

In Logan Park, for example, community members are referring to their GIS maps as they lobby developers and property owners to create public art, bulletin boards, and other amenities that respect and contribute to the longstanding blue-collar and artistic culture. Some community members have learned about the neighborhood's past reputation as a home for underground music through the maps and are now exploring ways to revive that legacy and make it more visible.

GIS maps are just one method, but a staid, academic report is emphatically not an option. The presentation of this information should be living, public, accessible, and wholly owned by the community so it can be used by the community. [SmaPI](#), a graphic novel that functions as a planning document created by the Frogtown neighborhood in St. Paul, provides another example of how to convey community priorities in an engaging, interactive way.

The collaborative, interdisciplinary approach of the GIS maps and SmaPI offers a valuable lesson about protecting intangible heritage: safeguarding cultural legacies cannot be the preservation field's responsibility alone. Preservationists should increasingly see themselves not as stewards of a to-be-determined policy apparatus, but as ambassadors of a community's sense of place. This field can provide a critical understanding of how culture, history, and heritage directly impact our lives. Now we should examine how to connect that understanding to broader community development

efforts—and into other fields and disciplines, to establish a multi-sectoral movement.

In Cedar-Riverside, for instance, the community cited the presence of diverse immigrant businesses as an important piece of their intangible heritage. Now, we see our task as connecting our insights to planners and economic development specialists to create better translation services for business owners, increase facade grants, and ease permitting processes. The Logan Park community said the density of artist studios is a critical element of their cultural identity. Now we see our task as informing City Hall and real estate specialists about our insights in order to envision sustainable ownership models that preserve the use of the large warehouse buildings which are home to the arts.

We must continue to develop new policies to strengthen preservation efforts. Perhaps more importantly, we must find new uses for the ones we already have by strengthening interdisciplinary connections with our peers and expanding our notion of what preservation can look like.

Engaging communities about intangible heritage will always be daunting because the results are far from clear. This is, of course, a feature, not a bug: the lack of obvious proscriptive measures forces us to engage, understand, design policies specifically tailored to a community. We're all better off when we participate in this messy process.

We certainly have a long way towards doing this consistently in Minneapolis. But our work has taught us valuable lessons about how we could be most useful to communities—how *preservation* can be most useful to communities: We can provide people a platform to articulate who they are so they can better advocate for who they want to be. FJ

MICHAEL TOLAN is a Master in Public Policy candidate at the Harvard Kennedy School and former Community Engagement Coordinator for the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota. He can be reached at tolanmichael@gmail.com.

1 Throughout this piece, I use the phrases “intangible heritage” and “cultural assets” interchangeably.