

ForumJournal

VOL. 32, NO. 4

Intangible Heritage



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation
Leadership Forum**

Shared Spaces, Invisible Imprints: Intersections of Latinx and African American Intangible Heritage

SEHILA MOTA CASPER AND LAWANA HOLLAND-MOORE

When we talk about “intangible heritage,” we are talking about those qualities of place, culture, and the nuances of the daily lives of a cultural group that are not easily quantifiable, but generally appreciated and valued by the community in ways that outsiders and traditional historic preservation practitioners might not even perceive. Shared culture is embodied by physical places—notable buildings, unassuming vernacular structures, even alleyways and empty lots—and also by the myriad activities and cultural traditions associated with those places.

We gather on brownstone stoops and in *yardas* (yards), reaching across them to share stories, news, or food with family and neighbors. We wave or call out to one another down streets and around neighborhoods that have become our shared spaces. Music fills our ears. Backyards and front and side lawns become places of celebration of the milestones of life. These are the places where culture and traditions continue to be transmitted across generations, and where deep connections are formed. These spaces and the structures within them hold the identity—both past and present—of that community. Even when physical places are altered or lost, the activities and bonds associated with them remain.

Communities of color connect within their spaces through their traditions of communal life and heritage identity, with the two often blending. The intangible cultural heritage and imprint of communities of color continue to transform our urban landscape. As cities across the nation lose buildings and sites due to the forces of densification, displacement, and gentrification, African American and Latinx communities are challenged to protect the places that reflect their cultural identity and landscape. Both



Chicano Park, San Diego, California.

COPYRIGHT © NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

historically and in contemporary society, these spaces are often shared by both communities and represent intersections and commonalities of experience.

CONNECTIONS LINKED TO, AND TRANSCENDING, PLACE

History—and the built environment that is a part of that history—may be used to help reclaim a community’s identity and acknowledge its cultural presence. African Americans, displaced from their ancestral homelands and memory due to enslavement, created a connection with their African heritage through intangible traditions, as seen in the retention of vestiges of African dialects, foodways, crafts, and music. One of the best examples of this cultural retention can be found along the [Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor](#), which extends down the East Coast from Wilmington, North Carolina, to Jacksonville, Florida. Development pressures in locations such as Hilton Head Island (just outside of Charleston) have caused displacement of the Gullah community, creating a loss of their homes and a threat to a distinct, unique culture with a direct link to the past.

Little Mexico, a once-thriving community in downtown Dallas, was a refuge for thousands of Mexicans fleeing the violence of the 1910 Mexican Revolution. In the following decades, Mexicans and

Mexican Americans created a built and culturally meaningful environment. Spanish conversations, outdoor socialization, and traditional architecture transformed downtown. Locally owned *tienditas* (stores) and businesses popped up throughout the *barrio* selling traditional food such as *pan dulce* (sweet bread) and Mexican spices; throughout the *barrio* women made fresh *tortillas* and sold them daily. Their connectedness to culture and landscape were expressed through the celebrations of their motherland, with the most meaningful holiday being *el Diez y Seis de Septiembre*, or September 16th, Mexico's Independence Day. Urban renewal has all but erased Little Mexico, and only a handful of the historic buildings survive, but the connection and social ties continue through public celebrations and the expression of foodways and with the still-prospering restaurants that began in the *barrio* such as El Fenix Restaurant and El Chico Café.

Places of community interaction and activism—such as barber-shops and beauty parlors, restaurants, community centers, and fraternal organizations—are valued in the African American commu-

nity. Plazas and open communal space are significant to the Latinx community; places like [Chicano Park](#) in San Diego and [Casita Rincón Criollo](#) in the Bronx. Spiritual sites are very important to both communities. Ones such as [Clayborn Temple](#) in Memphis, the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, and Church of the Epiphany in Los Angeles not only served as places of communal religious worship and community centers, but also acted as meeting locations for civil rights and labor activists.



Clayborn Temple

PHOTO COURTESY STEVE JONES

No matter how humble or unassuming the historic structure or site, it is nonetheless the location of intertwining lifeways and traditions. Recognizing these hidden or intangible elements figures greatly in determining what is important—what is historically significant and valued—to that community. It affects how the historic significance of places of meaning to communities of color should be evaluated, as communities' needs and concerns might be very different than what is evident to “outsiders.” The challenge, then, is how to think about and evaluate those intangibles into what is considered the formal historic significance evaluation and designation process.

THE IMPACTS OF DISCRIMINATION AND DISPLACEMENT

Shared multilayered histories of marginalization and discrimination have created opportunities for the Latinx and African American communities to live, interact, and react both side-by-side and together. Systemic discriminatory policies that perpetuated racism through segregation forced communities of color to create their own enclaves—barrios and neighborhoods where they found comfort in familiarity, and support while functioning in a country often hostile to people of color.

Policies that enforced housing segregation, such as redlining and restrictive covenants, limited not only where black and Latinx residents could live but even the money they could receive to purchase their homes in the first place. Following World War II, developers rushed to create housing for returning GIs and their young families, but former soldiers of color were not able to take equal advantage of the opportunities. Whole suburban communities, such as the Levittowns created in New York, Pennsylvania, and Bowie, Maryland, barred them from owning homes there. Mexican American veterans faced the same discriminatory housing practices on their return that they had before leaving. Organizations like the [American G.I. Forum](#) were established to secure earned G.I. benefits and protect the civil rights of Latino GIs.

In order to make way for urban renewal policies and the expansion America's highway system, urban neighborhoods across the country were deemed “blighted.” From Atlanta to Detroit to



Left: In Little Havana, Cuban elders gather to play dominoes in the public park. Right: Little Havana's traditional building stock faces a range of threats, including development pressure, demolition of historic buildings, and displacement of existing residents.

PHOTOS COURTESY STEVEN BROOKE STUDIOS

Tucson, neighborhoods such as Little Mexico, Dallas' first Mexican barrio, were cut through and decimated. Similarly, the destruction of an African American neighborhood in Southwest Washington, D.C., was the basis for the landmark Supreme Court decision *Berman v. Parker*, which upheld these policies in the name of eliminating "blighted" areas. These urban renewal policies that created blighted neighborhoods, coupled with federally subsidized suburban developments tailored to white families, spurred white flight into the suburbs and urban cores became predominately black and brown.

Urban spaces are dynamic. Urban cores change and the neighborhoods within them evolve over time. You can see this in neighborhoods such as [Little Havana](#) in Miami. Little Havana transitioned from a thriving 1930s Jewish community, housed other ethnic groups, and in the 1960s became a Cuban safe haven, transforming into the Little Havana that exists today and is home to residents from the Caribbean, South and Central America, and elsewhere. Little Havana residents have created a vibrant Latinx corridor and bustling neighborhood on and off of *Calle Ocho* (8th Street). There, Cuban elders continue their traditional pastime of playing dominoes in the park; artistry is expressed through murals and music; *ventanitas* offer a walk-up window for strong, sweet *cafecitos*.

In New York City, black and Latinx communities have long shared histories and interaction. The worldwide cultural phenomenon that is hip hop, with its associated music, dance, and graffiti art styles, was created by black and Latino youth in the early 1970s. Its birthplace is recognized as 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, an unassuming apartment building in the Bronx, where DJ Kool Herc's now-legendary party started a movement. New York City's East Harlem began as an African American, Irish, and German neighborhood, followed by Italians and Eastern European Jews, and then Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Dominican residents. It derived its nickname "El Barrio" from its predominately Latinx residents.

At the intersection of both black and Latinx cultures is the concept of "*Afro-Latinidad*," which recognizes shared African and Latinx heritage in the Caribbean and Central and South America. Being Afro-Latinx is not mutually exclusive, as one is both black *and* Latino, and Afro-Latinx individuals and communities celebrate both cultures and their traditions. El Barrio is the location of the [Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute \(CCCADI\)](#), whose founder, Afro-Latina activist and artist Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, created "[El Querido Barrio](#)" ("My Beloved Neighborhood") to tell the stories of more than a dozen sites through the use of an [augmented-reality virtual tour](#).

However, the pressures of development and gentrification have disproportionately affected black and Latinx neighborhoods nationwide. In Little Havana, for example, residents increasingly worry about escalating rents and longterm affordability. Mom-and-pop restaurants and locally owned grocery and clothing stores also fear being priced-out or otherwise displaced by new development or commercial gentrification.

Communities of color, such as Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, are being gentrified not only by white incomers but also by *gente* ("people") from the community, especially younger, more affluent ones who are returning to it to buy homes and invest in businesses. Called "[gente-fication](#)," a term that is attributed to Boyle Heights wine-bar owner Guillermo Uribe in *Los Angeles* magazine, the process can be equated to what is normally perceived as hipster gentrification and takeover.

Places can serve as anchors, rooting culture and identity to them, but they also do the same for that community's memory. When a neighborhood's original residents are displaced and the area begins to reflect its newer residents more, more than just structures are lost. There can also be the erasure of a community's legacy and living memory, which makes the preservation and acknowledgement of who was once there that much more important.

MAKING THE INTANGIBLE TANGIBLE

So how do we as preservationists make the intangible tangible? Since the National Register's criteria for listing does not include intangible resources, these must be tied to a tangible resource. [*National Register Bulletin 38: Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties*](#) was developed to address this by considering the cultural significance and social values of a site. Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs) are usually associated with Native American spiritual or sacred sites, but a TCP can also be located anywhere of cultural, social or historic significance and meaning to a living community of any cultural or ethnic minority group.

What makes sites such as Manhattan's African Burial Ground or [*Shockoe Bottom*](#) in Richmond also qualify as a TCP? They serve as places of meaning, with both historical and spiritual significance to a living community. *Bulletin 38* took displacement into account by stating that if a property has gone unused for a lengthy period of time, with use beginning again only recently, that does not make the property ineligible for the Register, citing the example of Native American tribes who were forced onto reservations or converted to Christianity.¹ A site's use does not have to be continued. What matters is the community's continuing cultural identity and the site's relation to that community's history. The Bulletin also recognizes that in an urban landscape, all ethnic groups could have places that hold cultural value to a particular community, this includes sites like Casita Rincón Criollo in the South Bronx.

These places of meaning help cultural communities to reclaim intangible connections to a place and to ancestors for whom those connections were lost. This opens possibilities for how we can view

black and Latinx cultural spaces. By consulting with and understanding the values of the local community and looking at how intangible aspects of heritage and culture manifest and intersect in the built and social environment, historic preservationists can incorporate those qualities into resource identification and evaluation.

As practitioners, we are trained to look for traditional primary sources, but sometimes, no matter how hard and how long we look, the information just isn't there. Such is the case with the [Rio Vista Farm](#) in Socorro, Texas (outside of El Paso). As the processing center for the nation's largest bracero (guest worker) program, with nearly 5 million work contracts granted to Mexican nationals during 1951–1964, it is a site critical to much family, community, and national history—yet relatively little is known about it. There is scant documentation about the bracero experience, or about the buildings within the facility. The City of Socorro and the National Trust will be nominating this site as a National Historic Landmark. We are relying primarily on oral history research to unearth personal accounts, which will help us better understand the shared experience and the historical use of the buildings. While this approach is not revolutionary, it has been seen by some as radical. But for those of us who come from communities of color and value generational learning in family and community settings, these oral narratives are very much a part of our cultural traditions and feel authentic.

As the nation changes demographically and transitions to majority non-white, it is imperative that heritage practitioners embrace the audience of the future by learning how to empower communities of color to preserve both the tangible and non-tangible aspects of their heritage and identity. One of the most effective ways to transform our work is by connecting with community leaders in black and brown neighborhoods to learn from them and their cultural values and practices—both shared and unique—that contribute to the positive shaping of their cultural, social, and physical heritage. By using more inclusive ethnographic approaches such as oral histories and cultural mapping, encouraging the teaching of traditional expressions, and engaging and empowering

community knowledge-holders, preservation practitioners can look outside of their traditional preservation toolbox and incorporate these methods to not only tell a fuller story, but discover new ones that have not been considered before. **FJ**

SEHILA MOTA CASPER is the senior field officer at the National Trust’s Houston Field Office. LAWANA HOLLAND-MOORE is the program assistant for the National Trust’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund. They are also, respectively, the 2013 and 2014 National Trust Mildred Colodny Scholars.



TAKEAWAY

AfroLatino Forum



TAKEAWAY

Preserving African American Historic Places



RESOURCE

Latino and Hispanic Heritage Stories



TAKEAWAY

Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage.

1 Thomas F. King and Patricia L. Parker, *National Register Bulletin 38: Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties*, National Park Service, 18.