

CO-DESIGNING **BLACK** NEIGHBORHOOD **HERITAGE** CONSERVATION

BLACKSPACES | BROWNSVILLE

BlackSpace shares inspirations, experiences, and lessons learned from an exploratory process of co-designing heritage conservation efforts alongside members of Brownsville, one of Brooklyn's Black enclaves.

WHO IS BLACKSPACE?

BlackSpace demands a present and future where Black people, Black spaces, and Black culture matter and thrive.

As a collective of Black urban planners, architects, artists, activists, and designers, we work together to protect and create Black spaces as well as push each other to excellence in our chosen professions.

During a year-long process BlackSpace worked with community members to document neighborhood memories, identify cultural assets and heritage values, and create space for local heritage conservationists to connect in their predominantly and historically Black neighborhood of Brownsville, Brooklyn. The process was non-linear, with time built in to reflect on mistakes before moving on to next steps. While most of the BlackSpace team is not from Brownsville, we are thankful for guidance from generous community members.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PLAYBOOK

This playbook aims to provide guidance to practitioners both local and non-local, striving to collaborate with community members to document, conserve, and amplify Black neighborhood cultures.

The design of the playbook highlights our process, some of the “magic moments” that served as eye-opening experiences, lessons learned from our efforts, and actionable prompts that can help neighbors, practitioners, kids, and local cultural producers document, conserve, and amplify Black cultural assets in historically Black neighborhoods.

WHAT IS HERITAGE CONSERVATION?

BlackSpace defines heritage conservation as intentional actions that protect and elevate culturally significant markers, both non-physical and physical, in an effort to understand a place and the past, present, and future of its people.

Amplifying culture and heritage alone cannot combat urban forces like gentrification or economic disinvestment. However, heritage conservation is necessary in strengthening Black community agency.

Heritage conservation can:

- » Acknowledge cultural traditions, rituals, and sites as assets
- » Advance self-determined narratives; inspire local advocates
- » Affirm peoples' rights to their places; prevent cultural erasure
- » Fortify social networks; facilitate deeper community connectedness

Heritage conservation can be done by:

- » Anyone rooted in or making the culture of a community - aka “cultural producers”
- » Those who keep and share neighborhood history and culture, formally or informally, and those who might not necessarily recognize their work as “heritage conservation”
- » **You!** In collaboration with local and non-local practitioners, together using a co-design and skill-sharing model



Brownsville Easter Parade, March 2018



LEARN//LISTEN//ACTIVATE

It is critical to **learn** about the cultural landscape of where you will be working and to determine how your team will work together. This information will guide what your team needs to **listen** for and how you should **activate** at engagements to expand your neighborhood knowledge.





BE HUMBLE LEARNERS WHO PRACTICE DEEP LISTENING

We gained so much from being humble learners who practiced deep listening. We started with a pre-written set of questions and ***rather than rigidly sticking to the script***, we used the questions as prompts to ***build upon the stories community members wanted to share***. By taking the time to ***listen and weave in follow-up questions about the locations of events*** — the geographic layout of events, places, buildings, and people significant to the neighborhood's Black history and culture began to emerge.



CENTER LIVED EXPERIENCE

Community members continued to remind us of the importance of the everyday experiences, and to not assume that there were “right” ways to answer questions. “What are your favorite cultural experiences in Brownsville?”... “Ah, the bodegas of course - to me, they’re close to my heart.” He went on to describe how he loved the ritual of getting the news daily and being known by the people in and around the store. As close as we could and as much as we could, we ***(geo)located any tangible and intangible assets on physical maps*** then transferred those to a Google map of sites of neighborhood importance to Black Brownsvillians.



SEEK PEOPLE AT THE MARGINS

We targeted some of our engagements to specific communities within Brownsville, like young women. We found it crucial to ***think about age, gender, sexuality, ability, and relationship to the neighborhood (and their intersections)*** to better understand places of cultural significance for groups that city planners typically overlook.

RESPECT

What are **tangible** gems of culture in the neighborhood? (i.e. Black historical sites, institutions, buildings, parks, homes, streets, etc.)

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

What are **intangible** gems of culture in the neighborhood? (i.e. block parties or funerary rituals; well-known community myths/mottos, unofficial neighborhood mascots/mayors, etc.)

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

Research and list any upcoming events of Black cultural significance and, if appropriate, reach out to the organizers to see if and how you might collaborate on cultural heritage work. Then do it!

Event _____

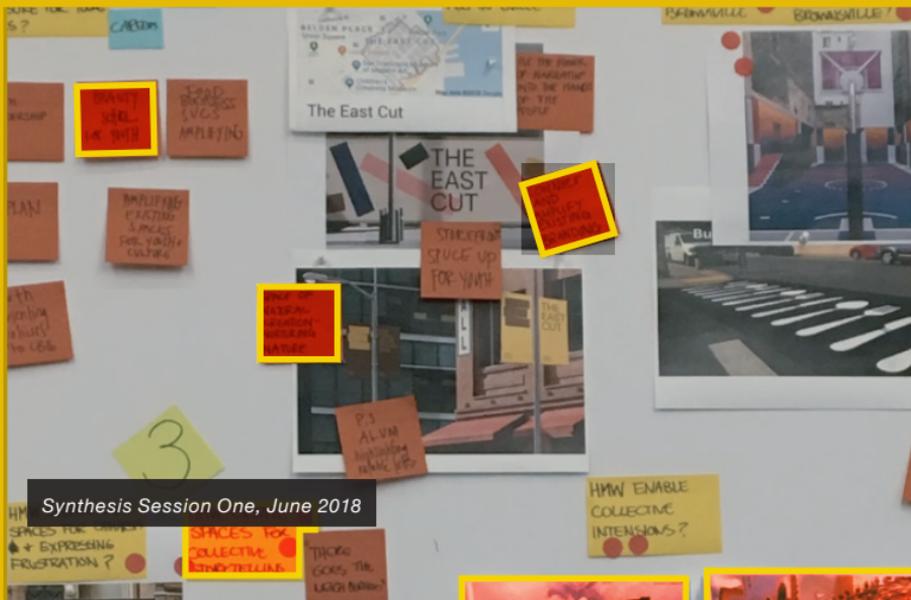
Date _____ **Contact** _____

Event _____

Date _____ **Contact** _____

Event _____

Date _____ **Contact** _____



Synthesis Session One, June 2018



REFLECT//SYNTHESIZE



Recognize the importance of an iterative process by allocating short and long periods of time to **reflect** on what you've learned in your working group. Establish regular meetings or calls with your collaborators to process the listenings, learnings, and activations, and to plan the next engagements. Longer, dedicated times for in-person sessions to summarize or **synthesize** the listenings should result in a set of major cultural heritage themes. Using those insights, update and test those assumptions and determine the next best steps based on newly collected information and context.





RECKON WITH THE PAST TO BUILD THE FUTURE

Reflection allowed us to **think about** our **process of engagement**. This space was critical for us to **realize** our **mistakes, highlight successes, and unlearn** traditional and often **limiting methods and strategies for working with people** throughout the project.



FOSTER PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL EVOLUTION

We found that neighborhood interactions based on a flexible and intentional process provided us with many chances to **grow dynamically as a group**. Reflection allowed us to all **become more rooted in** our **individual and collective value systems**.



CULTIVATE WEALTH

We **create opportunities** by hiring Brownsville youth to record our engagements and reflection sessions with photography and video. Working with them enhanced local insights while also perfecting their technical skills in cultural production and cultural heritage conservation.



PROMOTE EXCELLENCE

In service of continued learning and reflection, we used the heritage themes uncovered at synthesis sessions to **design** low-cost **heritage conservation prototypes** or “micro-designs”. We then arranged to **try out a set of heritage prototypes at community cultural events** to gain feedback on their resonance. This process allowed us to hear substantive participant feedback, **note what was right and wrong**, and **improve** our **designs and process for future engagements**. Then we went back into reflection and synthesis with our group to determine whether to repeat this phase or move to Co-Develop. Excellence is born out of a process of testing, refinement, and implementation.

CORRECT

Take the time to process what you've learned from engaging with community partners and shift your approach or process if needed.

What were the goals of your event or activity?

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

Who participated in the event or activity?

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

Who was missing from the conversation or activity?

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

What were any unexpected insights you gained from the event or activity?

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

What will you do to improve the next time?

- 1 _____
- 2 _____



Heritage Happening One, June 2018



CO-DEVELOP

Focus this phase on the cultural producers and heritage conservationists in the community guiding the culminating collaborative design project or “Heritage Happening.” Make the first Heritage Happening a brainstorm meet-up, start the conversation by sharing the design process so far, micro-design concepts, and the major heritage themes.



Collaborators (now co-designers) should have a good framing to help start the **co-develop** process and then brainstorm their own concepts. Together, arrive at one tangible heritage happening idea on which the team can jointly execute.





PROTECT AND STRENGTHEN CULTURE

We imagined our team of co-designers would overlap with people that we met at events. We realized it made the most sense for us to **co-create alongside** the subset within that group of **people already producing and conserving neighborhood culture** distinct to the neighborhood. Thus, BlackSpace members found our value in convening Brownsville-based cultural producers in new ways and in co-producing heritage happenings.



PLAN WITH, DESIGN WITH

It would have been easiest for BlackSpace members to extract the heritage values from the neighborhood, design a solution behind closed doors, and independently make and implement a tangible heritage conservation project; however, we operated with the belief that the **design, construction, and implementation** process should be **with community members** and is essential to arriving at a heritage conservation plan that **aligns** with **the real needs, capacities, and ideas distinct to the neighborhood and its people.**



MOVE AT THE SPEED OF TRUST

While executing this process included many real life time constraints and lots of project and people management logistics, we realized, within those pressures, it was critical that we also made spaces to be flexible and **allow for the unexpected magical moments** that ultimately defined this work. Sometimes we also had to **release** our **pre-developed agendas in order to be responsive**, respect community members' best judgments, or honor requests made beyond the terms of the project.

COLLECT

Based on a list of partners and collaborators, add in (broadly defined) skills each brings to the effort that can be used for a co-designed heritage conservation effort.

Name of partner

Skillset(s)

On a larger screen/sheet of paper, work together to sketch or diagram how these skills might interact or support one another for a collaborative design rooted in the neighborhood's Black heritage.

REFLECT

What were the unexpected moments of magic in your process? What joy did you witness or create?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____



Heritage Happening Two: Pop-up Neighborhood Storytelling Tour, October 2018



CO-CREATE//LINK



Continue to cultivate partnerships with local cultural producers and heritage conservationists. Work with identified co-designers, to **co-create** heritage happenings that both strengthen their work and create something new for the neighborhood. Ongoing work should focus on creating a **link** between your group's learnings to the existing neighborhood cultural infrastructure



through co-creating practical tools (like listservs, calendars, playbooks, etc.) that cultural producers and heritage conservationists can use to further support and strengthen their existing work in and about the neighborhood.



CREATE CIRCLES, NOT LINES

We **connected** *in-person and online with creative neighborhood storytellers* like griots, event producers, book writers, mural artists, dance company owners, documentarians, fashion designers, and others. We deeply **valued** *community leaders committed to producing place-based experiences that celebrate local Black leaders, culture, and spaces*. It was in this newly **formed** *network of cultural producers* that we were able to brainstorm and co-produce a new heritage happening.



MANIFEST THE FUTURE

Ultimately, neighborhood heritage conservation is about neighborhood future-making. This effort allowed us to **co-envision** *a future and make a present day experience* that welcomed expressing neighborhood cultural heritage in unique ways and **included** *intergenerational community heritage sharing*.



CELEBRATE, CATALYZE AND AMPLIFY BLACK JOY

We **ensured** *co-created moments included elements of joy and gratitude*. We typically **organized and raised funds to pay for shared meals in the neighborhood at every convening** with healthy, hearty, and dietary-restriction-friendly food from Three Black Cats Cafe, a Brownsville-based Black businesses. We made time for our heritage work to include joy through the act of receiving and sharing a good meal in community. We also welcomed celebration, connection with other change agents, and positive and meaningful encounters in the neighborhood.

FOCUS

Beginning any efforts in any neighborhood, and especially those that are historically Black and/or marginalized, requires that people do so with a respectful interest about the histories and people of the place. Always embark with intentions that have equity and justice for the neighborhood's people as the outcome.

Throughout this playbook we included symbols that each represent one of BlackSpace's 14 principles that guide our work toward realizing equity and justice in historically Black and/or marginalized neighborhoods. We invite you to use the manifesto that we drafted based on our research, design experience, and year-long engagement in Brownsville!

We hope that this playbook encourages people who care about their neighbors and neighborhoods to continue making space for telling and valuing the many stories of neighborhoods. We hope you have found inspiration for enlivening the past in the present day to build the future.

To access, the BlackSpace manifesto visit:

<http://www.blackspace.org/manifesto>

Follow us on social media @blackspaceorg



BLACKSPACE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THANK YOU to all past, present, and future Black Brownsville residents, young people, community leaders, small businesses, community organizations, cultural producers, heritage conservationists, and all who “never ran, never will” from making Brownsville’s history great.

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