

# IRAA

THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART



## ON ARCHITECTURE

VOL. 25 NO. 2

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Erratum: the "Show of Shows" article in the previous issue (v. 25, no.1), erroneously stated that 50 works from the Dianne Whitfield Locke & Carnell Locke collection were exhibited at the Hampton University Museum. Eighty works were exhibited. The show then traveled to the Howard University Gallery of Art in Fall 2014 where 50 works were shown.



Eric Mack  
SRFC-9, 2013 (detail)  
mixed media on canvas  
10 x 12"

For more about this artist,  
see inside back cover of this issue.

Front cover:  
Eric Mack  
AFT-0110, 2014  
mixed media on paper  
8 1/2 x 12"

For more information about the *IRAAA*, and to order: <http://museum.hamptonu.edu/store/>

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# UPWRAPPING THE MYSTERY OF A LOST COMMUNITY AND PRESERVING AND EXTENDING ITS LEGACY

CARMINA SANCHEZ-DEL-VALLE

*From the past — the essence of accumulative consciousness, the remnants of lost ceremonies, the loosening and unwrapping of mystery.* — BETYE SARR, 1977

From Betye Saar: Jane H. Carpenter with Betye Saar (Pomegranate, 2003)

THE WEEKSVILLE HERITAGE CENTER ARCHITECTURAL PROJECT reviewed here saw its beginnings more than 40 years ago in Brooklyn. The momentum of the Civil Rights movement was awakening interest in lost histories and communities, while development forces were rapidly redefining the urban landscape. This project is the culmination of a process spearheaded by citizens united by the desire to document the history of the rapidly disappearing neighborhoods of their childhoods and youth, among them the remains of the black township of Weeksville. It was founded in the 1830s by James Weeks next to the Bedford Stuyvesant and Crown Heights areas of Brooklyn. Only the alliances and resolve of many people on a multitude of intersecting paths produced the break that led to the identification of the only standing physical markers of Weeksville.

One of those people is James Hurley, an historian who volunteered one summer to teach a non-credit course, “Exploring Bedford Stuyvesant and New York City,” at the Central Brooklyn Neighborhood College, an arm of Pratt Institute. The course

was associated with its Department of Planning, and depending on the source, met in '66, '67 or '68. The course gave its adult students — many of whom were Brooklyn residents — the opportunity to explore the histories of local and neighboring communities. Hurley’s own personal interest in the area called Weeksville was provoked in part by his perusal of a July 30th, 1873, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* newspaper article. It had a disparaging description of Weeksville, which he noted was in stark contrast to the stories recounted by some of his students, who had grown up there. The article pointed out the parsimony of city officials in resolving problems caused by a major flood in 1872. Weeksville had seen floods before, but with dropping temperatures, flood waters filled cellars with three-to-four feet of ice for two months. When the ice thawed, it flowed into the ground level of many Weeksville houses. While residents clamored for action, city officials argued that it would be too expensive and that the properties’ values did not justify such an investment:



The Weeksville Heritage Center Buffalo Avenue main facade. Caples Jefferson Architects PC

*"The streets are in a state of chaos and general uncertainty. Ruts, stones, garbage, ashes, dust, and all other disagreeable and disgusting things are there in abundance, while the houses on either side appear to be debating the question whether they should move off to some safer place, or remain just where they are for fear of a worse fate befalling them."*

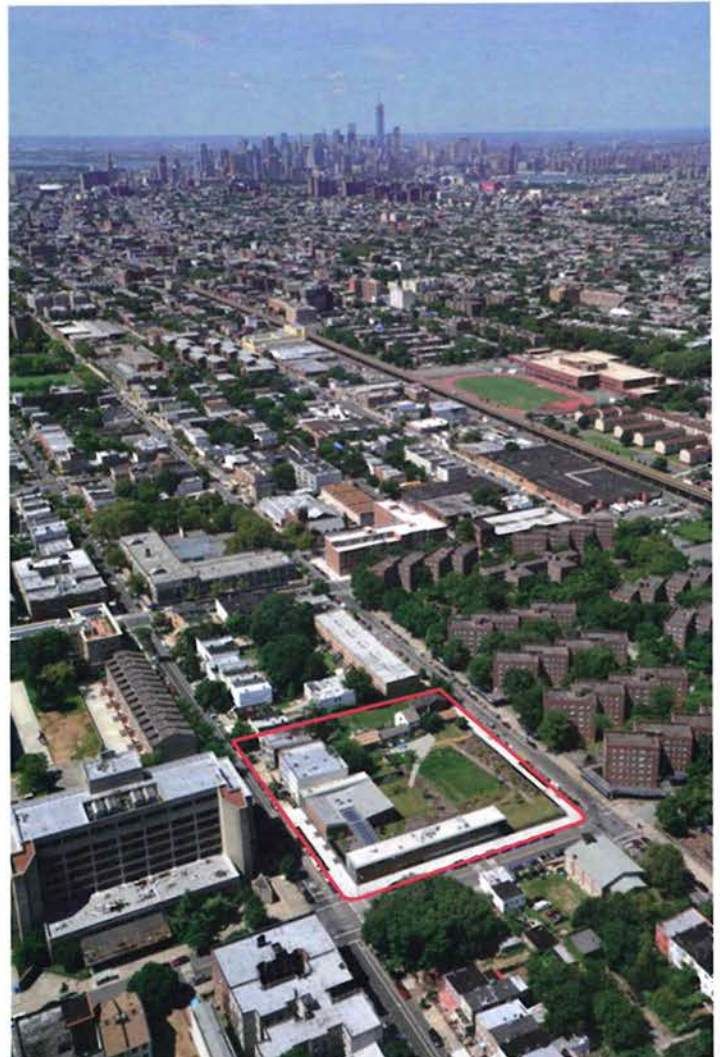
The description excerpted above from the *Brooklyn Eagle's* article is in sharp contrast to the almost bucolic depiction of Weeksville's landscape, noted in the same piece: "Nature has kindly done her best to make the place picturesque. It is all hills and hollows. The hills are the highest, and the hollows the deepest of any in the city." And where "most of the houses have little patches of garden surrounding them [...] their products in the shape of corn, tomatoes, beans, peas and what is called "truck" are plentiful and well grown. The live stock consists of chickens, geese, and goats." But then again the reader runs into: "The inhabitants are principally colored people, and its chief products are low groggeries, goats and mangy, half fed and wholly savage curs."

Remove the crooked prejudiced descriptors to discern a place structured as a town, where people lived, practiced subsistence gardening and animal tending among verdant rolling hills.

In that pivotal summer class, Hurley and two of his students, Patricia Johnson and Dorothy McCullough, conducted considerable archival research on Weeksville. (Some *IRAAA* readers will know Johnson who went on to become this journal's longtime circulation and customer relations manager.) In a 2011 interview Hurley recalled it was Johnson's admirable research skills, coupled with McCullough's ability to connect with people that advanced the project early on. Because of this work, they received the first grant for "Project Weeksville."

In 1968, city officials announced that an area soon to be uncovered as the center of Weeksville — a block bounded by Pacific and Dean Streets on the north and south, and Troy and Schenectady Avenues on the east and west — was to be demolished to make way for a Model Cities housing project. Hurley said he contacted the Model Cities Committee of New York via telegram, requesting they support his proposal to document the site before complete demolition occurred. To bolster the legitimacy of his request, he added to the team Michael Cohn, curator of anthropology at the Brooklyn Children's Museum. He also worked with Eunice Samuels in the pursuit of support, who was a staff member at the Central Brooklyn Neighborhood College. Dorothy McCullough brought in Justice Oliver D. Williams to the effort, and Justice Williams introduced the team to William T. Harley, a WWI veteran and longtime Weeksville resident who was described as "a source of information and inspiration."

Many volunteers from the area participated in the archaeological dig of 1968. Among them were Jesse Simpkins the bulldozer operator and Boy Scout master Wilson Williams with his Troop 342. Interest in "Project Weeksville" may have been facilitated by a 1968 article in *The New Yorker* that reviewed Ray Mack Thompson's walking tours through Bedford Stuyvesant and Weeksville. But to that point, no standing buildings of Weeksville had been identified.



Aerial view of the Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn. Caples Jefferson Architects PC (CJA)



View through perimeter fence of the Hunterfly Road historical houses. Photo: C. Sanchez-del-Valle



View of new center from boardwalk through wetland linkage with historical houses. Elizabeth Kennedy Landscape Architect.



Chakaia Booker sculpture in context. Caples Jefferson Architects PC



The gallery's transparent space with steel structure reminiscent of basketry bathed by textile-like shadows. Caples Jefferson Architects PC

It took Joseph Haynes, a black mechanical engineer and a professional pilot from Brooklyn, to find them. Employed as an engineer for the subways of New York, Haynes had an active avocation of documenting the history of black neighborhoods. Hurley recalled during his interview that he had met Haynes at the Brooklyn Children's Museum, and had encouraged him to become a tour guide. Hurley said Haynes had "a zest for Project Weeksville." At Hurley's request, Haynes flew Hurley to an area of interest for some photographic documentation. Hurley had done aerial photography in the Navy, and wanted to take advantage of those skills in a time when aerial photographs and accessible GIS were not readily available.

Haynes and Hurley set out to find the remains of Hunterfly Road, a Weeksville main thoroughfare, by flying at low altitudes. Hurley's photographs from that flight were not clear so they returned to take more. Hurley recalls how, on a Saturday in 1968 while piloting with one hand, Haynes took the decisive photograph of four houses along an alley in odd alignment with the other neighborhood blocks. In 1969, the alley site would become the focus of an effort to ensure the

preservation of what became known as the Hunterfly Road Houses. A vision that the houses would become "the nucleus of an Afro-American History Museum" led Joan Maynard to found the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History. Joseph Haynes was a charter member, and Hurley became one of its presidents. Through the long years of seeking funding and support to complete the project, Maynard is recognized today as the "angel" who never lost hope, and who donated her own life savings. Many others, among them Edna Morton Jones and Betty Welch directly and indirectly supported the work over the years.

Finding the houses was fortuitous. It opened the way for focused but broad community involvement on the site fronted by Buffalo Avenue on the east, Bergen Street on the north, and St. Marks Avenue on the south. African American architect Harley Jones joined the collaborative effort. He was chair of the department of environmental design at Pratt Institute, and his grandparents "had been born in Weeksville." It was reported his grandfather built an apartment house on Bergen Street, off Schenectady Avenue. Jones received funds from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and completed a feasibility study for the preservation of Weeksville houses. The houses were designated New York City Landmarks in 1970, and were listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. Between 1978 and 1982, under the supervision of professors Robert Schuyler and later Roselle Henn, City College (CUNY) Field School students conducted archaeological investigations of the houses and the larger site. And, the work undertaken by Hurley's initial tuition-free course was extended with a Pratt Institute History Workshop.

Additional research was conducted from 2000 to 2003 by archaeologist Joan H. Geismar, who worked as a consultant for the Hunterfly Road Houses Master plan team of Wank Adams Slavin Associates (WASA). The firm completed the restoration design of the historical houses. They also developed the initial program for a museum and education center that had been part of Joan Maynard's vision. In 2004, historian Judith Wellman submitted a report on the larger context of Weeksville titled "African American Life in Weeksville, New York, 1835-1910." It has been expanded into a book published in October 2014.

One aim of the WASA archaeological research was to verify that the Weeksville Houses were indeed aligned with Hunterfly Road, described as "a long-gone, historic roadway, possibly originating as an Indian trail that meandered along what became the patent line between the Dutch towns of Flatbush and Flatlands." The research also investigated whether the oldest house dated back to the 1830s. No remains of Hunterfly Road were found, since the site had been significantly disturbed in the 20th century. It was confirmed three of the houses were occupied in the 19th century, but not earlier than the mid-1860s. Reconstructing history from material means is complex since remains and their interpretation are affected by tangible and intangible factors.

The Weeksville Society worked to preserve the houses with the organized pursuit of funding. This included teacher Marguerite Thompson and the children of PS 243, who created a "Weeksville Resource Room." Through the years it took to gather

the necessary funding, the houses continued to deteriorate. In 2005, restoration work on the houses was finally completed, and were opened for visitation. Also that year the final design of the Weeksville Heritage Center project was presented. It was to include “cutting-edge workshop and classrooms, resource center, performance arts venue and expanded administrative space.” The groundbreaking ceremony took place in June of 2008.

Among the criteria for the selection of Caples Jefferson to design the building is the firm’s minority-owned and woman-owned status. Everardo Jefferson is an Afro-Latino from Panama.

From inception in the 1960s to completion of the \$34 million Weeksville Heritage Center in 2013, project planning was collaborative.

The architects were required to maintain a dialogue with multiple constituencies. Unlike the efforts put forth to conserve the houses, which brought together members of the community, this last part of the process was driven by representative organizations, governmental and non-governmental, public and private. Collaboration with the contractor and fabricators of building assemblies and parts was crucial for the project’s attention to detail.

Caples Jefferson Architects consulted with David Dial, noted among other projects for his participation in the development of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, to better fit the architectural program and ensure the best use of resources. They conceived a program that accommodates change through time, and wittily takes advantage of overlaps to reduce its size. The commission involved fencing the site, enhancing the open space with a variety of programs, and adding space for education and research, exhibition and administration. The new facility has a small footprint, almost equivalent to that of the historical houses taken together. It frames the corner where the Indian trail may have crossed into the site.

The building is a series of boxes, as the architects explain, connected by a yellow or “pumpkin-colored” sunshading glass and steel pergola. The assemblage appears as a thickening of the fence that demarcates the Weeksville remnants, a hallow ground. The site has been masterfully interpreted and designed by landscape architect Elizabeth Kennedy. The synergy between the two groups of designers is manifested in the total integration between new and historic buildings in relation to the open spaces. The architects explain the intention is to offer a visual experience from every angle.

Caples Jefferson had intended to design a building with a high sense of craft, color, and tactility. The project was to be layered by different heritages in conversation with each other. In the design the architects propose a contemporary interpretation of striking elements of African art. They wanted to open a dialogue regarding the impact and influence the African heritage has had on all, and the part it played in shaping an American identity. The idea was to embed the references in the construction of the project itself. They were influenced by the idea of the riff in jazz music, the repeating motif in the background that moves to the foreground. Most importantly, the design was not to overpower the historical houses.

To start working on the design Caples Jefferson drew from a selection of African art that represented some of the groups



The textile-inspired pattern of the sunscreen on the glazing is projected on to the steel beams in the gallery. Caples Jefferson Architects PC



Wood, plastic, paint and fabric are used compositionally in the theater. Photo: C. Sanchez-del-Valle



The perimeter fence pattern designed by Caples and Jefferson is projected on the sidewalks surrounding the center. Caples Jefferson Architects PC

brought to the Americas by force: Kikuyu, Bamana, Yaure, Pende, Igbo and Benin. The arts of those groups were to also define the form and details of the project. A former member of the Caples Jefferson team, Audrey Soodoo Raphael was instrumental in this stage of the design. Her graduate thesis had been “From Kemet to Harlem and Back: Cultural Survivals and Transformations.”

The objects chosen — an initiation shield, headdress, sculpture of a head and mask — were made out of wood and brass with decorations in white and black, dark brown and vibrant reds, green, purple and ochre. The architects also studied a textile from Congo for the glazing frit. All of these objects had clearly defined functions within rituals that were indispensable for the life of the communities that produced them. In their time they were highly appreciated objects of sinuous forms and intricate detail. They were made by master craftspeople knowledgeable about materials, execution and the language of forms and symbols.

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Carmina Sánchez-del-Valle is professor of architecture at Hampton University. She holds a doctoral degree in architecture from the University of Michigan and is a licensed architect. Among her current research are the mapping of the Civil War era refugee camps in Hampton where the displaced African American population settled and the architectural visualization of their cabins.