



CCR-8

Preserving neighborhood culture with oral histories

The city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1,518,000), plans to redevelop and rehabilitate areas of Philadelphia that contain large areas of blight. But as the city clears vacant lots and demolishes buildings, it wants to document, preserve, or salvage the important architectural and cultural resources of these neighborhoods. The Community Heritage Preservation Project, with strong mayoral support, is helping with this effort by collecting the oral histories of neighborhood residents and disseminating this information through exhibits, school curricula, and walking tours.

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Implementation notes

Leadership/staffing Approximately six city planning commission staff members have been involved in the project, recording the oral histories, developing the program brochure, taking photographs, and preparing the exhibition. The city hired two neighborhood residents who knew their neighbors well to serve as neighborhood apprentices; they also collect oral histories.

Timeline The program began in 2001 and was completed in 2003.

Budget/funding The city received a \$20,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for this project, as well as a \$1,000 grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Program description The city decided to focus on two neighborhoods, Belmont (population 5,200) and Francisville (4,500), because they have significant architectural and cultural resources, few buildings in these neighborhoods have historic designation, several severely deteriorated buildings will probably need to be demolished, and both neighborhoods have an active and interested community base on which to build the project. After receiving some training, the neighborhood apprentices identified people to interview and chose appropriate interview questions. They then conducted interviews with



22 neighborhood residents, and all interviews were recorded. During these interviews, residents recalled the people who had lived in the neighborhood, what happened in local buildings, and what it used to be like to live there. The apprentices also helped find a collection of newspaper clippings and other information about musicians and nightlife in one neighborhood, as well as old letters.

As part of the Community Heritage Preservation Project, planning commission staff also developed curricula for elementary and high school students. These curricula require the children to explore their neighborhoods and learn about the architecture and history of local buildings.

Results Photographs and stories collected through the project were assembled into an exhibit that was displayed at first at city hall, then in Belmont and Francisville, and finally at the planning commission's offices. Selections from the oral histories were used in walking-tour tapes for each neighborhood that are available at the planning commission offices. The results of the project will also be incorporated into the master plans for each neighborhood. The city hopes that now that the curricula and model for collecting oral histories have been developed, other neighborhoods will use them to preserve their own architectural and cultural histories.

