Abstract

Preservation on 125th Street: Culture, Economics, and Politics

Is historic preservation viable on 125th Street, where issues concerning politics, economics, and heritage values are so complex? This thesis focuses specifically on 125th Street, a major cross-town commercial artery in New York that is also the cultural and intellectual epicenter of the African American population in the United States. However, much of the street’s extant built fabric represents the ambition of second-generation European immigrants. To black residents of Harlem this is an inherited heritage that has decayed through decades of blight. Regardless, much of the streetscape of 125th Street continues to serve as an incubator for activities that promote the advancement of African Americans. On-going large-scale, government-subsidized commercial development is compromising this. Harlem leaders tout what is the incremental destruction of historic buildings for new ephemeral projects as a harbinger of the “Second Renaissance” and community advancement. This thesis argues otherwise; these development agendas undermine the cultural significance of Harlem that is reflected in 125th Street’s built fabric. This thesis examines the adverse consequences of economic revitalization in a historically deprived neighborhood by investigating historic and current trends in development, local attitudes toward cultural identity and heritage, and agents precipitating change. Through the analysis of three preservation case studies on 125th Street, this thesis recognizes that preserving the qualities that make 125th Street special is especially challenging and requires a radical protocol. Preservation through moderated change can be a vital means for protecting and enhancing the heart of black America.