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Our Home Is Here: Wa Na Wari's Origin, Challenges, and Sustainability

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Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities

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Abstract

The name *Wa Na Wari* translates into “our home” in the Kalabari language of Nigeria. The “our” can be interpreted as referring to the Black collective that Wa Na Wari creates space for through art, historic preservation, and connection. It’s a very fitting name as the community center operates out of a house in the Central District. A product of redlining, the historically Black neighborhood has gone through a seemingly endless series of community facelifts. Many of those Black families have been pushed out and replaced by high-priced apartment complexes. Yet the fifth-generation Black owned home that Wa Na Wari occupies is still standing and still very much Black. Wa Na Wari is a welcoming community center and art organization dedicated to uplifting the legacy of Black people in and around the Pacific Northwest. Although they’ve faced challenges along their journey in creating space for the Black collective in Seattle, their resilience, openness, and friendly nature have enabled Wa Na Wari to thrive and to inspire a displaced community to reunite and flourish.

Our Home Is Here: Wa Na Wari's Origin, Challenges, and Sustainability

Origin Story

At 911 24th Avenue in Seattle's Central District sits the house once owned by Frank and Goldyne Green amongst many other seemingly ordinary houses. It looks like many nearby houses with a front yard, a porch where people can gather and talk, and a driveway with a smaller guesthouse tucked away in the back. However, unlike the surrounding homes, occupied by families or roommates, the Green's former house is home to an "immersive community art project that reclaims Black cultural space and makes a statement about the importance of Black land ownership in gentrified communities" (Wa Na Wari, n.d.a, para. 2). Now called Wa Na Wari, meaning "our home" in the Kalabari language of Nigeria, it is very much a home in the sense that it is a place where Black community members can congregate and share meaningful moments together, much like an extended family. But this house is like no other house on the block because it's also a community center.

Wa Na Wari was founded by Inye Wokoma, Elisheba Johnson, Jill Freidberg and Rachel Kessler. Before creating Wa Na Wari, the four artists had worked together on a public art project in the Central District through Seattle Public Utilities. After completing that project, the four decided they wanted to continue to collaborate. Along with being one of the co-founders, Wokoma is the land steward and guardian of the house formerly owned by his grandparents, Goldyne and Frank Green, who purchased it in 1951. In talking about Wokoma's grandmother's house, Elisheba Johnson shared that Wokoma "...had always had this vision of it being an art center, but he thought it'd be in the future" (personal communication, February 27, 2021). The four artists put seed money together to rent the house, which enabled Wa Na Wari to open its doors on April 5, 2019. After opening, they created a GoFundMe campaign that raised \$30,000.

There is something significant about the presence of Wa Na Wari in that home in the Central District. As a community center that provides community members with a space to gather and celebrate, it also utilizes the power of art to bring people together and create a sense of belonging. Johnson commented that they "...felt like taking up space in this neighborhood and having a really Black place was a radical act of reclaiming space" (personal communication, February 27, 2021). To understand the significance of the community center and the legacy it is preserving, a brief history of the Central District will provide more context.

The History of the Central District and Urban Villages

This Central District in Seattle was once home to hundreds of Black families. Due to practices such as redlining and racially restrictive covenants, many BIPOC families were forced to live in neighborhoods like the Central District. Redlining is the act of denying mortgages to people of color, preventing them from affording homes in certain neighborhoods. The term came from how lenders would use red ink on maps to mark the areas considered dangerous and/or of higher risk of defaulting on mortgages. These areas were more likely to be neighborhoods of Black, Latino, and Asian families. Redlining limited the movement of non-white families into predominately white neighborhoods based solely on racial prejudice. Accompanying redlining were racially restrictive covenants which were written into property deeds, making it legal for property owners or real estate agents to limit who they sold or rented property to. If Black families wanted to move into the neighborhoods governed by these covenants, they were met with resistance. Although open-housing laws were later passed, making racially restrictive covenants illegal, as of 2014, many neighborhoods in Seattle still had deeds containing language that prohibited the sale or rental of property to individuals or families that are Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) (Silva, 2009).

After decades of redlining and racially restrictive covenants concentrated Black families in the Central District, their displacement started as far back as the 1970s, but the effects of gentrification took the next 20 years to settle in (Johnson, 2019). Through the Growth Management Act passed in 1990 and the City of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan passed in 1994, conveniently titled *Toward a Sustainable Seattle: A Plan for Managing Growth*, Seattle changed the zoning code to allow more multifamily buildings to be constructed in the Central District. As single-family homes gave way to apartments and condominiums, the demographics of the Central District changed drastically from 73.4% Black in the 1970s to 17.1% in 2017 (Johnson, 2019).

The concept of 'Urban Villages' was adopted as part of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan. *Seattle's Comprehensive Plan: Urban Village Element* defines 'Urban Villages' as community resources that enable the City to: deliver services more equitably, pursue a development pattern that is environmentally and economically sound, and provide a better means of managing growth and change through collaboration with the community in planning for the future of these areas. The urban village strategy is a comprehensive approach to planning for a sustainable future. (Seattle Office of Planning & Community Development [Seattle OPCD], 2005)

The idea was meant to support the City's commitment to "growing in ways that ensure a livable future, and to growing sustainably" (Seattle OPCD, 2005, p. 1.3). In the City's eyes this could be a tool to promote more equality and diversity in certain neighborhoods. In reality, the designation of urban villages gave developers permission to build bigger buildings, which then made those neighborhoods more desirable to outside investors and raised property taxes. Making land values in the neighborhood increase pushed those that could not afford the increase in

property taxes to leave. In the Central District, this led directly to the displacement of Black homeowners.

A Cultural Facility Challenges Zoning Policy

Every cultural facility faces challenges. Wa Na Wari is no stranger to setbacks. Their obstacles came in the form of racially charged complaints from neighbors that led to their awareness of zoning issues. After Wa Na Wari opened its doors, the City of Seattle received ten Code Compliance complaints from a neighbor between April and September 2019. One complaint describes a “big ugly billboard installed in front of house.” Another complains that the “illegally-zoned property (Wa Na Wari) that is calling itself a ‘community center’ is having an alcohol-fueled ‘frat party’ again” (City of Seattle, n.d., para. 1). Johnson recalls, “...we had a really racist neighbor call the City on us...if they saw Black people, they assumed they were coming to Wa Na Wari and threatened to call the cops on them.” The neighbor complained about one visitor who turned out to be Wokoma’s brother (personal communication, February 27, 2021).

The community center also faced zoning issues around land use. The house was zoned as a single-family residence. The co-founders knew you couldn’t run a business out of a house, but “...didn’t think we were doing anything wrong” (E. Johnson, personal communication, February 27, 2021). The City told them the zoning didn’t allow the house to be used as a community center, but if they moved just one block over, the zoning was different and would allow them the freedom they needed. With the City’s commitment towards a sustainable city and the rise in property taxes pressuring Black homeowners, the co-founders wondered why can there be zoning policies could benefit developers but not homeowners?

Since they were determined to use the space as a community center, they had to go through a long, intense, and expensive rezoning process that took about a year and a half to complete. According to the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) the decision on rezoning applications is made by the Seattle City Council. The rezone process starts with a pre-submittal conference. Prior to the pre-submittal conference the applicant must submit a pre-submittal application by email. The minimum fee for the first two hours of staff time during the conference is \$788. If the conference exceeds two hours, each land use staff person charges an hourly rate of \$394 per hour (Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections, 2020). Next is the design review process. This is where development proposals are advanced through Early Design Guidance (EDG). Then the application appointment is the next step. For the application the SDCI requires documents such as a plot plan, a vicinity map, notes from the pre-submittal conference, and an environmental checklist along with six copies of plans for review. After that, the rezoning application becomes subject to the Appearance of Fairness Doctrine which means there can be no direct or indirect communication with a Council member while the application is pending. A public hearing is held before the City's Hearing Examiner to consider the rezone recommendation and to create a record for the Council's consideration. The Council now has the authority to vote on the recommendation and any more documents that are needed are drafted and sent to the responsible property owner. The SDCI documents the City Council's final decision, collects any outstanding fees, and issues a Master Use Permit for the rezone.

It is understandable that the process was so long because of the number of steps, however this brought up another issue for the founders of Wa Na Wari. While they had funds and the community support to rezone, other smaller Black and Brown organizations might not have these

resources. Johnson mentioned that someone from the City suggested that Wa Na Wari try to find another location like a storefront, but she and the other co-founders were adamant on staying in the house saying, “we can’t really do it in another place, it’s about this house...the storefront doesn’t have the soul we were looking for” (personal communication, February 27, 2021). So while the process was long and expensive, costing Wa Na Wari a total of \$50,000, Johnson says, ...it was important for us to go through that process because...other Black and Brown arts organizations that might run up against us that don’t have those resources, we want to be able to advocate on their behalf. So, we had to go through the full process to talk about how complicated it is, how inaccessible it is, and then try and make changes and make it easier for people. (personal communication, February 27, 2021)

Wa Na Wari may have had hurdles to overcome in the beginning, but it is clear that the legacy of displacement is stopping with Wa Na Wari. It is because of this experience with the City of Seattle and its zoning policies that the community center has become an advocate for the few Black homeowners left in the Central District. Central Area Cultural Ecosystem for the 21st Century (CACE21) is a community organizing project created to continue the organization’s work of “anchoring Black homeownership and fighting Black displacement in Seattle,” (Wa Na Wari, n.d.c.). The project surveys Black homeowners and assesses their needs and challenges as homeowners in the Central District. The goal of CACE21 is to develop a community report which will be used to campaign for more supportive land use policies for Black homeowners in Seattle.

Sustainability and Wa Na Wari

When speaking about sustainability in this context, the term is being used to describe the ability to continue to exist. Sustainability means creating longevity. For some non-profit and for-

profit organizations, longevity depends on money. For Wa Na Wari it is something different. Sustainability is at the very core of Wa Na Wari's existence. From Wokoma's stewardship over his grandmother's house to Johnson's comments in the present day about the community center, "...this project was always about [the] economic stabilization of Black homeowners" (E. Johnson, personal communication, February 27, 2021). Going back to the question from the previous section: "Why should zoning policies benefit developers, but not homeowners?"

Johnson says that Wa Na Wari has

two parts of our work...We have the arts programming that's super important to us...We're all artists so we just believe in having a radical art center...I want it to be the most important Black art center north of San Francisco...When people come in they're going to see really exceptional artists and their boundaries will be pushed. But then also this zoning policy work that we now call CACE21 or Central Area Cultural Ecosystem for the 21st Century where Inye [Wokoma] is working with other activists in UW [University of Washington] and other folks...They're releasing a homeowners survey to Black homeowners and we'll be able to use that as a tool to go to policymakers and etc. to be able to talk about the needs of Black homeowners. (personal communication, February 27, 2021)

After the homeowner survey, CACE21 is preparing to release a survey for Black cultural workers and hoping to achieve the same results within the community. That is about creating longevity; continuing to exist. Especially in a neighborhood that continues to shift.

Gentrification of the Central District area is a hot topic amongst Seattle citizens, however Johnson emphasizes that that is not what the community center is about. "This project [Wa Na Wari] is about liberation, this project is about Black joy...this project was always about the

celebration of Black people in place” (personal communication, February 27, 2021). They want to shift the narrative and consider themselves an anti-displacement project. The community center presents an interesting conversation on what community centers should look like.

4Culture offers the definition of a cultural facility as a building that make cultural experiences possible. Even though Wa Na Wari is a house, it is still a community center. It makes cultural experiences possible, especially for BIPOC community members that might not have the access otherwise.

Conclusion

Although there were a few bumps in the road in the beginning for Wa Na Wari, the community center and art organization has succeeded in creating a “space for Black ownership” (Wa Na Wari, n.d.b, para. 1). The community center continues to engage in place-keeping, the “active care and maintenance of a place and its social fabric by the people who live and work there,” for the Black community still housed in the Central District; fostering the arts and culture that is already present (U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, 2016, para. 1). Johnson mentions another term, ‘place-knowing,’ which she says is a concept brought to her by a friend. “Place-knowing comes from the indigeneity and this idea of people who live in the place and know what’s best for the place” (personal communication, February 27, 2021). In an interview conducted by Kamna Shastri for *Real Change*, Wokoma expressed fond memories of growing up in the Central District. Although those memories are in a sense nostalgic, Wokoma points out, “In large part that experience, for better or for worse, was a result of a lot of racist systems — so, you know, systems that created geographic Black communities, concentrated ethnic communities” (Shastri, 2020, para. 35). While some might remember and wish for the past Central District neighborhood, it’s safe to say that Wa Na Wari is putting down roots in

community advocacy and carrying on the legacy that was started years ago. Wa Na Wari is here and so is its home.

Method Note:

This case study was developed by Ashley Marshall, MFA 2021 for Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership course Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities taught by faculty Katie Oman. An interview was conducted with Elisheba Johnson, co-founder, member of the Executive Leadership cohort and curator at Wa Na Wari. Primary research was conducted during Spring Quarter, 2021. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

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