

How I Became a Preservationist AN INTERVIEW WITH MARINA ORTIZ (DSP '07)

Marina Ortiz, long-time resident of East Harlem, has seen quite a number of changes in her neighborhood over the years. The greatest change of all, however, has been the gentrification that has threatened to erase the physical signs of the neighborhood's rich immigrant history. So as a response she founded East Harlem Preservation in 2005 to promote the rich cultural history of East Harlem. The Web site/watchdog agency has just been incorporated and is seeking non-profit status.

East Harlem Preservation monitors large-scale development, supports preservation, and fights privatization of public parkland. "[Diverse communities] are also having our landmarks moved," says Ortiz. "We're losing [them] and we're losing the rich history of our communities."

DSP: How did you become a preservationist?

MO: I was inspired to begin efforts to preserve the rich history, culture and architecture of "Spanish Harlem" and the greater East Harlem when the inevitable footprint of gentrification began to take its hold on our community. In February 2007, an historic 125-year institution, Our Lady Queen of Angels Roman Catholic Church, closed its doors, forcing a number of parishioners to take to the streets and hold weekly services and even a funeral on the sidewalk in protest. Our public parkland, meanwhile, is being systematically privatized and sold to the highest bidder. These are the sort of fundamental changes that have motivated me to learn more about the preservation movement and organizations such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

DSP: How did you become familiar with the National Trust?

MO: I learned about the National Trust from a local architect, Raymond Plumey, who has worked tirelessly to

preserve our community. Mr. Plumey also worked with the Trust in a failed attempt to create an historic district within East Harlem known as Pleasant Village, although he continues in that effort.

DSP: How was your experience as a diversity scholar?

MO: I met a lot of wonderful people, I learned many, many, many valuable lessons from people in the field, I learned what the preservation movement was all about. I also learned how the preservation movement and environmental movement go hand in hand which makes a lot of sense to me.

I was a little disappointed to see that [at the 2007 Preservation Conference] there were some panels that were about displacement and real estate development, i.e., saving the buildings and not the people and history that shaped the buildings. Restoring a building by way of displacing a people makes absolutely no sense. To me it's not what we should be doing as preservationists.



DSP: In your opinion, what is the value of diversifying the preservation movement?

MO: I believe the preservation movement is obligated to diversify if it wishes to remain relevant since "minority" communities are the ones that are increasingly at risk. Ethnic communities such as Harlem, El Barrio, and parts of New Orleans are losing their identities, their history, along with their populace. More and more minority communities are becoming lost, gentrified or displaced. If the preservation movement is to have meaning aside from the buildings we save, it's [necessary] that we broaden our effort.

DSP: Final Thoughts?

MO: I very much enjoyed my experience as a diversity scholar and I want to continue working with the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

For more information about Marina's work at East Harlem Preservation, please visit <http://www.eastharlempreservation.com>.

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The goal of the Diversity Scholarship Program is to increase the diversity of participants at the annual National Preservation Conference and in the preservation movement. The Scholarship covers registration, hotel and/or travel for approximately 60 community leaders from diverse social, economic, racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds to attend the Conference.

The National Trust defines diversity as inclusive, embracing people of all races, creeds, genders, ages, sexual orientations, religions, physical characteristics and disabilities, veteran status, and economic or social backgrounds. For the Diversity Scholarship Program, it also encompasses historic places, communities and geographical areas that represent the full range of unique characteristics, experiences, and cultures found in the U.S.

DIVERSITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

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