

The size and boldness of artist Njaimé Njie's installations in her "Homecoming" series appear all the more impressive as she stands next to them. This mural, featuring an image of Pittsburgh native and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson, adorns a building at the corner of Centre Avenue and Elmore Street in the Hill District.





ART IMITATING LIFE

LOCAL PITTSBURGH ARTISTS AND ARTS ORGANIZATIONS ARE
CARRYING THE BATON OF THE HILL DISTRICT'S CULTURAL LEGACY,
NOT ONLY HONORING THE NEIGHBORHOOD'S ARTISTIC
PAST BUT ALSO HELPING TO BUILD ITS ECONOMIC FUTURE.

BY JULIA FRASER

In the heart of the Hill District, larger-than-life black-and-white images of neighborhood residents past and present are pictured inside a colorful sitting room. The faces proudly peer into the community from the side of the Bedford Avenue home of August Wilson, the late Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and native son whose work introduced the Hill, its people, and their struggles, dreams and culture to the world.

Artist Njaimh Njie created the installation, the first site in her public art project, “Homecoming,” which adorns other notable buildings in the neighborhood with images inspired by oral histories, family photos, observations and other research she undertook to envision neighborhood gatherings across time.

“What would those conversations look like if those people could talk and share their experiences, and how would that connection shape the future of the neighborhood?” Ms. Njie asked. “If we knew of the past and we could recognize what’s going on in the present, how would that shape the future? The way to visually create that was to create these sitting rooms.”

Her work is a part of the latest chapter in the rich legacy of art in the Hill District. It is where Mr. Wilson found inspiration; the jazz of Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington once spilled from the New Granada Theater; and photographer Charles “Teenie” Harris chronicled urban African American life. It is the historic center of African American culture in the City of Pittsburgh.

It also is a neighborhood that has suffered disinvestment, neglect and ill-conceived urban planning that razed the vibrant Lower Hill and displaced businesses and thousands of families to make way for the now-demolished Civic Arena.

“A lot of Pittsburghers would look at that and say ‘You just have to get over that and move on.’ But if a lot of your experiences and identity is a part of that, it’s not easy to move on,” said Terri Baltimore, the Hill House Association’s director of neighborhood engagement. “That’s been a shadow for the neighborhood. But there are a number of ways people have used that shadow and turned it into light.”

Public art by Ms. Njie and others pepper the neighborhood. New parks and other green spaces are being designed. Mr. Wilson’s childhood home and the New Granada Theater are being restored. New art galleries and artist residencies are emerging. And partnerships with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and other institutions are being reestablished as the arts drive economic development in the Hill District, which through all of its hardships never ceased being creative.

“Establishing black culture as the revival lynchpin sets in motion a suite of different decision-making from investors later,” said Rob Stephany, Community & Economic Development program director at The Heinz Endowments, which has awarded more than \$1 million to support the arts in the Hill District in the last five years. **h**

August Wilson House



Photos by Renee Rosensteel

“It’s hard to overstate the significance of August Wilson,” said Paul Ellis, Jr., Mr. Wilson’s nephew and executive director of the nonprofit August Wilson House. “His life and his work are closely intertwined with the history of the Hill District. Its bustling nature, cultural vitality, [and history of urban renewal leading to resident] displacement are the perfect recipe for provocative representation in his plays. People in the Hill District are aware of that history.”

Plans for restoring the childhood home of the late Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright are being drawn with an official capital campaign to follow. The project already has attracted high-profile donors, such as actors Denzel Washington, Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry, as well as local philanthropic support, including grants from the Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation. In September, Mr. Washington brought to Pittsburgh \$5 million in contributions that he had raised with the support of well-known celebrities to give the initiative a boost.

Once restored to its 1950s condition, the August Wilson House will include an interactive museum and space for local artists, community programs and performances. Even while fundraising for the project has been underway, some performances have taken place on the Bedford Avenue property. Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company, led by founder and producing artistic director Mark Clayton Southers, has staged the playwright’s complete 10-play Century Cycle and presented several of Wilson’s plays in the yard of the Hill District house.

“There’s a large void in creating opportunities for talented artists,” Mr. Ellis said. “When I was growing up, I watched my uncle create opportunities for artists, countless people in the field. He was a gateway. That was important to him and that became important to me.”

African American landscape architect Walter Hood is designing the grounds. Although exactly how the grounds will be used is still unclear, outdoor theatrical productions will continue to be included, Mr. Ellis said.

“It’s truly honoring an American hero in this neighborhood,” Brian Brown, former vice president of the August Wilson House board of directors, said of the project. “He’s truly an African American hero in this city and that’s different. It’s about pride and blackness. That glory is really powerful.”

Oscar-winning actor Denzel Washington, left center, was a featured guest at the September “ground blessing” ceremony that marked the beginning of restoration construction at the childhood home of the late Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson. Mr. Washington presented \$5 million in contributions from celebrities as part of his fundraising effort for the project. During the event, Jamaica Johnson, a junior at Pittsburgh Creative and Performing Arts 6-12 performed a monologue from Mr. Wilson’s play “King Hedley II.”



Photos by Renee Rosensteel





Public Art

The Hill District is emerging as a new frontier for art that is being created from an intimate relationship between the artist, the community and the people who live there.

Njaimeh Njie drew inspiration for “Homecoming” from the lives of residents she explored, and supplements her installations with an online component that includes an interactive map of the Hill along with the oral histories she gathered.

Her work is one of the projects to emerge from the Temporary Public Art and Placemaking Program. Supported by the Endowments, this collaboration between the community development nonprofit Neighborhood

Allies and Pittsburgh’s Office of Public Art has commissioned artists to work with community organizations and create art in six neighborhoods.

In the Hill District’s August Wilson Park, past, present and play merge in Alisha B. Wormsley’s “We Came From the Stars,” commissioned by the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. A series of viewfinders throughout the park allow people to see images depicting past and current neighborhood scenes as well as those envisioned for the future.

A grocery store on Centre Avenue, the community’s main thoroughfare, boasts two large murals by Leslie Ansley, commissioned

by the Hill House Association five years ago. One, “Our Vibrant Future,” colorfully captures the modern neighborhood’s character and strength while the other, “Hill District Hey Day,” pays homage to the vibrant years when the neighborhood was known as “Little Harlem.”

“The artist’s process in these public art projects includes engaging with community members,” said Sallyann Kluz, director of the Office of Public Art. “The community members get tied in and see what’s happening in terms of development. That doesn’t happen if you don’t have the organic relationship with a place.”



Elan Mizrahi

Capturing the vision of a strong, dynamic Hill District and its prominent musical heritage is “Our Vibrant Future,” above, by artist Leslie Ansley. The mural stretches across an interior wall of a grocery store in the community. Art also is prominent in the design of parks and other green spaces in the Hill, including August Wilson Park, right, where enlarged replicas of photos by the late Charles “Teenie” Harris, who chronicled Hill District life, give additional energy to walking trails.

Public art and design merge at August Wilson Park, formerly Cliffside Park, which is near the August Wilson House, and offers a panoramic view of Pittsburgh’s northern neighborhoods and suburbs. Alisha Wormsley’s artwork, Teenie Harris’ photographs and quotes from the namesake playwright dot the trails.

It’s the first park project to be based on the “Greenprint for the Hill District,” a comprehensive green space framework for the neighborhood created by the Walter Hood Design Studio, that includes a water garden, parks, trails, a green overlook and fields.

Another high-profile example of how the Hill District is marrying art and green space in reimagining the neighborhood is the I-579 “cap.” The cap itself will be a concrete covering over the I-579 Crosstown Boulevard highway currently separating the Hill from Downtown that will be topped with a pedestrian park.

Overseen by the Sports & Exhibition Authority, the project is expected to begin construction soon. Upon completion, getting from the Hill District to Downtown—the city’s center of employment, education and services—will no longer require crossing over the busy boulevard leading onto the highway. Instead, the Hill and Downtown will be connected by scenic trails and walking paths through three acres of green space dotted with gardens and seating areas.

But art and design have been applied to envision something more: a walkway with a story wall reflecting neighborhood history and culture; lawns large enough for events; an outdoor classroom; and paving patterns in the shape of a Sankofa Bird, a Ghanaian symbol that represents the need to reflect on the past to build a successful future.

“The community said early on that they wanted art included in the design,” said Mary Conturo, executive director of the Sports & Exhibition Authority. Artists Amir Rashidd, Jann Rosen-Queralt, and Dr. Kimberly Ellis, along with design consultant Lake Byrd of Communion LLC, worked with the authority as part of the construction design team for the park.

Green Space



Courtesy of Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy

Plans to rehabilitate and update the Hill District's legendary New Granada Theater, below, incorporate the lively colors of the building's original Art Deco style. Once restored, it could become the venue of performances like the "Lift Every Voice" concert in January, opposite page, which included members of the Hill District Unity Choir, right. The event at Heinz Hall in Downtown Pittsburgh was a collaboration between the neighborhood and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

Neighborhood Revitalization



Artists have always found support in the Hill District, and that's continuing, especially as the vital role the arts can play in community development is better appreciated. The neighborhood's 2011 master plan, for example, led to #ArtsinHD, an arts planning group for strengthening local arts and artists.

"We strongly believe that culture should be a defining part of neighborhoods; but how culture is represented should be developed with the community and for the community, not parachuted in by someone else," said Janet Sarbaugh, the Endowments' vice president for Creativity.

One key project #ArtsinHD is involved in is called Nafasi, an artist live-and-work space done in partnership with developer Joshua Pollard, CEO of the real estate firm Omicelo, and the Hill Community Development Corporation. Drawings and demolition have been completed on the Centre Avenue building that will house Nafasi, which means "space" in Swahili, as part of the renovations to create the artist mercantile site and residency for six local artists.

"This is the most active time for physical spaces for the arts since I've been here," said Justin Laing, chairman of #ArtsinHD and a former Endowments Arts & Culture program officer who was a Hill District resident for many years.

"Artists play such a unique role in neighborhood revitalization," said Mr. Pollard, a Hill District resident. "Many times when a neighborhood is going through change that is not inclusive of community members, it's artists from other parts of town saying 'Hey, this is what it should look like.'"

The New Granada Theater awaits renovation in the same swath of the Centre Avenue corridor. The Art Deco building was designed in 1927 by Louis Billinger, a prominent African American architect. It fell into disrepair and was acquired by the Hill CDC in 1995. The Endowments funded an engineering study that determined that the historic structure could be saved.

"Such an iconic physical structure is a nod to our history and an important part of our future," said Marimba Milliones, president and CEO of the Hill CDC. "I've always envisioned this cultural economy, this cultural tourism the Hill District could have. People don't want to hear about where Duke Ellington was named king of jazz. They want to stand on the ground where Duke Ellington was named king of jazz."

The New Granada will have three floors of mixed-use space for a theater and community use. "I think that the New Granada will be the heartbeat of the cultural and commercial core of the Hill District," Ms. Milliones said. "Its redevelopment is central to our psychological transformation, as well as our physical transformation."

It also fits well in a Centre Avenue corridor already shared by emerging and established art spaces. Among them are the Ujamaa Collective, a nonprofit boutique and artist education and work space that promotes the work of African women locally and abroad, and the Mecca Of Kulture and Art (MOKA) gallery and studio, a space being developed for art exhibitions, artist residencies and classes.

And more artists are coming. The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra recently revived a partnership with the Hill District after a community relevance survey reported feedback from neighborhoods like the Hill that was troubling.

"We heard that the symphony is only for rich white people," rather than for Hill District residents, explained Suzanne Perrino, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra senior vice president of learning and community engagement.

The PSO relaunched its partnership with the Hill District in January of this year with "Lift Every Voice," a concert hosted by actress Phylicia Rashad. The event featured a choir whose members were selected from choirs in the Hill; the premiere of the "August Wilson Symphony" by African American composer Kathryn Bostic; and the symphony sharing the stage with drummers, vocalists and artists from the neighborhood. 1,800 tickets were sold.

"Lift Every Voice" was followed by the "Sounds of Summer on Centre" concert in July, which was infused with artists and poets from the Hill celebrating female artists and featured Hill District-native Monica Ellis, a bassoonist with Imani Winds, a New York City wind quartet.

"A lot of things are promised to the Hill District," Ms. Perrino said. "A lot of one-offs or fly-by arts, and we didn't want to do that. We've been putting a lot of time into building trust."

This fall marked the beginning of a three-year fellowship program to bring national and

regional artists of color into the Hill District. The fellows will be provided with financial support and housing while they create, teach and showcase their work in the neighborhood. The initiative evolved from a partnership between the August Wilson House and Duquesne University, and is evidence of a trend to reacquaint the city's institutions with the Hill District community. The first fellow in the program is renowned poet Natasha Trethewey, who was appointed United States Poet Laureate in 2012 and 2014.

Upcoming events include a collaboration between the Hill District's Ebenezer Baptist Church and the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh on the choral piece "Let My People Go: A Spiritual Journey Along the Underground Railroad." The performance is scheduled for February at the church, which is near the location of an Underground Railroad stop. In March, the Renaissance City Winds, along with soprano Demareus Cooper and baritone Eugene Perry, will perform music primarily by African American composers during a concert at the Elsie Hillman Auditorium in the Hill House Association's Kaufmann Center.

"We're building these institutions in the neighborhood that are going to make it a cool place for the people who live here and part of the conversation about arts spaces in Pittsburgh," said Terri Baltimore of the Hill House Association. "It'll become a cultural touchstone of Pittsburgh, not an outlier."

Partnerships

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