

Place Talking: A New Possibility for Preserving Sites of Cultural Significance

“Now some of us, because we can read a little bit more, forget about the place we came from and some of the songs which help us go on. Now if we hide those sweet songs and try to get away from waht we came from, what will we tell our children about the achievment we have made and the distance we have come.”.

— Esau Jenkins, 1963

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On a scenic oak lined road that follows the curves of the river between downtown Charleston, SC and the island resort community of Kiawah Island lies a vine covered ruin of concrete block walls. In front of the building is a sign that reads Historic Site PROGRESSIVE CLUB. *A Community Service Center Est. 1948*. Nothing about the sign or the broken walls gives any indication of its cultural or historical significance. Nothing about what remains suggests this site was the center of a community education and civic engagement movement that became a model for communities across the nation during the civil rights struggle. Important figures such as Martin Luther King and Andrew M. Young came to this place to learn about strategies for voter education and community organization that were developed by The Progressive Club.¹ In 1989 Hurricane Hugo caused significant damage to the structure of the building. In a community with limited means, struggling to recover losses to personal property the uninsured building was not repaired. While there have been efforts to stabilize the structure since that time, it has deteriorated to the point where it might not be possible to rehabilitate the remaining fabric. The oral tradition of this coastal community is still strong and as a result the history of this place is largely anecdotal and individualized. It is also relatively recent. While these aspects place this site outside of the realm of traditional preservation might they also provide an alternative mode of persistence? This paper will explore the potential for the oral record of the place to suggest a model for the rehabilitation of the physical site. While the structure may not be reconstructed in the traditional sense, it might still have the power to speak.

GEOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Johns Island, South Carolina is part of the string of African American Communities located on barriers islands and tidal areas along the coasts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and the Atlantic coast of northern



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Florida, collectively known as the Gullah Geechee corridor. The Gullah Geechee people were brought to the New World from Africa and forced to work on the coastal plantations. There they developed a separate creole language and distinct cultural patterns. After emancipation these sea island communities persisted, taking advantage of the rich soils, long growing seasons and the bounty of seafood found in the surrounding water systems.² The geographic barriers of these areas allowed for the strong linguistic and cultural distinctions to remain virtually intact until the mid-twentieth century.

Traditionally oral cultures like the Gullah Geechee struggle in the 21st century with displacement, persistent lack of resources and diminishing cultural cohesion to hold the communities together.³ There is no “history” book, no registry, no clear chronology for community or its structures. The significance of places still transmitted by voice. Historical sites are maintained largely as a result of the shared narrative of community members.

IT STARTS WITH A STORY...

The African American community on Johns Island stretched out along the main transportation corridor of River Road in a very loosely organized settlement. Walking was the principle means of transport within the community for

Figure 1: Map of Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. National Park Service



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most residents. Houses were concentrated on both sides of the road with agricultural fields stretching out behind them to the river on one side and the island interior on the other.

If you ask someone to describe how the Progressive club started it will inevitably begin with two descriptions. The first description is of an event, the other is of a place. The event: An African American man was bitten by a dog belonging to a man from the white community nearby, in self defense he reflexively kicked the dog. The owner of the dog, angered by this reaction, shot the man. Surviving his wounds, the man asked the community to help him seek justice from the local authorities. Through the experiences of dealing with the local justice system and the white community it was decided that a formal structure should be established for responding to these kind of situations and that system should be administered by an organization that would act as an advocate for the community in its relations with external entities.⁴ Oral dominant groups rely on particular rather than general understanding to establish a basis for action.⁵ This anecdote embodies the reasoning that led to the formation of the club in a particular and immediate way - coupling its inception with a specific and violent and thereby memorable event.

The second aspect of the origins of the Progressive club is the fact that it grew out of a place already sacred to the community - the Moving Star Praise house. This small, unmarked, one room structure was used for communal gatherings and worship. Structures of this type were common among the sea islands, originally providing a space for African Americans to gather outside of jurisdiction and surveillance of the plantation system. They continued to be used after emancipation and while not churches themselves, these structures were affiliated with the local church. Praise house gatherings would incorporate aspects of more formal religious worship including singing and dancing as a signifiers of "praise". It was also the place for neighbors to share news and bring conflicts before the community for resolution.⁶ The "Praise" house was a neutral space where all comers could unburden themselves within a supportive atmosphere. Providing an opportunity for the individual to reconcile himself with the larger body to which he was a member on a regular basis- reinforcing their shared reality. It is from this informal system of governance within community that this secondary organization the Progressive club is developed to advocate for members in situations involving entities external to itself. The mention of the praise house in the narrative establishes the context of the story within the life and order of place. Associated by function and proximity - less than one half mile apart, the two structures represent the civic center of the settlement. The particular immediacy originating in action, both of the man and dog event and the activities associated with the praise house itself firmly establishes the Progressive Club within the physical, social and cultural context of the place itself.

A BRIEF HISTORY PROGRESSIVE CLUB

The organization raised funds for its advocacy and outreach. It also organized communal transportation to jobs on the mainland in the form of several small VW buses. One of the founders of the Progressive Club - Esau Jenkins seized the long commute to equip riders with the knowledge needed

Figure 2: Moving Star Hall. South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

to pass the citizenship tests required for voter registration in South Carolina at the time.⁷ While many in the group could not read, by repeatedly reciting the Constitution aloud while going over the text they grew familiar enough with it to pass the tests. The sometimes hour long time gaps between the riders different job schedules allowed the “waiting” time to be used for more intense lessons in reading and writing. It is hard to over-estimate the importance of voter registration to this group of people. It was the only path to meaningful participation in the larger civic realm.⁸ Influenced by his work with the Highlander Folk Center in Tennessee, the classes on the buses led to political education classes within the community, and the education of more individuals to teach the classes. It is from these organized efforts at large scale community education and voter registration that brought the Progressive club to the attention of the national civil rights movement – still in its infancy.⁹

In 1956 the Progressive club purchased a site of the former Mt. Zion school to house its operations. This one roomed wood framed building had been painted black to differentiate it from a similar structure serving the white community and as such it had negative associations among the people it served. In 1963 the original building was demolished and the existing structure was built in its place. The new Progressive Club building was composed of two large spaces. The one fronting the road was used as a cooperative grocery run by the club that paid dividends back to the community.¹⁰ A large central space was a multi-purpose auditorium and gymnasium, used by the Progressive club adult education classes, the ongoing citizenship classes and gatherings with local and visiting leaders in the civil rights movement. As the only space of its size in the area it was also used for basketball and volleyball games, church services, weddings, anniversary parties, dances, talent shows, childcare, boy scout meetings, and folk music festivals. Across the rear of the gymnasium was a narrow 9' series of dormitory rooms and bathrooms. The walls were made of 8" concrete block. The roof of the gymnasium was supported by closely spaced scissor trusses made of double 2 x 6's, while the roofs of the smaller spaces were made of 2 x 6 stick framed rafters. The doors and windows were wood or aluminum with simple 2 x 4 frames and brick sills. While this building was central to the life of the community its form and materials did not suggest its significance. It was constructed from light, modular materials like concrete blocks, and small wood members that could be easily transported. Supervised by local builder Esakia Jones, volunteers built it between day jobs and night prayers using the collective knowledge of building techniques from within the community.¹¹ An oral creation, it was a building sung and spoken into existence through the melodies already known and shared by this community.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE BUILDING

In 1989 Hurricane Hugo damaged the roof. As the structure was uninsured the community did not have the means to commence the necessary repairs and it has remained uninhabited since then. Efforts have been made to stabilize the walls, including steel strapping and tie rods and scattered debris has been collected and stacked inside the perimeter of the store. But it is not likely much of the existing fabric can be retained without the addition of new material. But there are fragments that remain largely intact and each of them embody different aspects of the story of the structure.



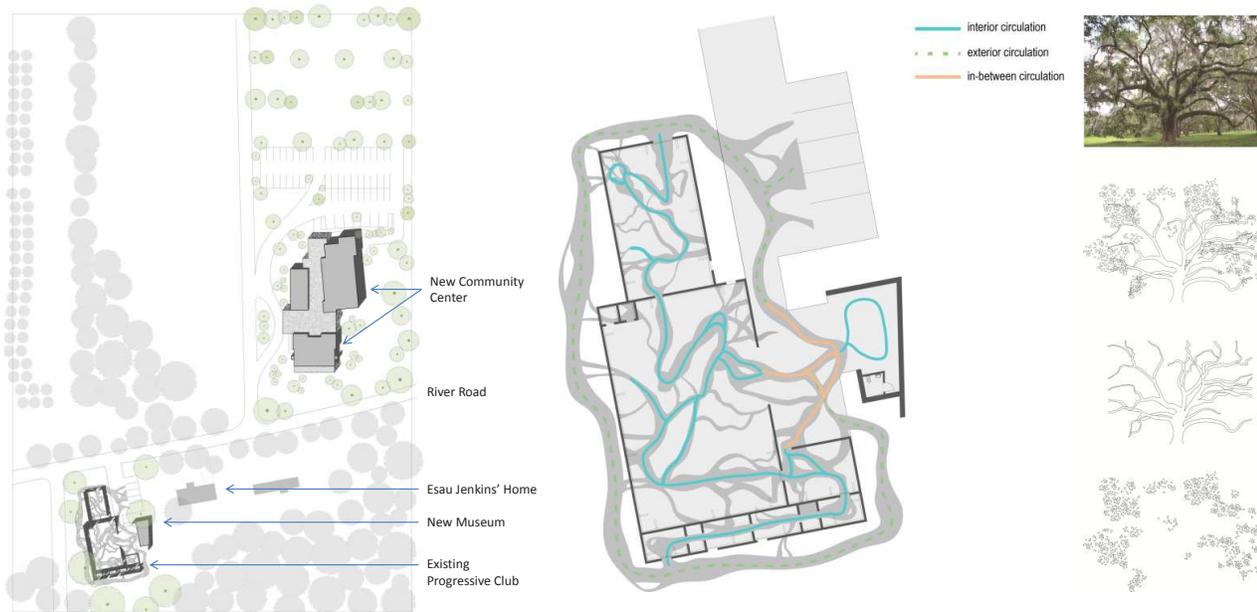
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Figure 3: Progressive Club 2012.
Photos: Alice Guess

The trusses are a fine example of folk construction and are cited as one of the key reasons for listing of the structure on the National Register. They are composed of 2 x 6's layered and lapped to span the 50' space of the gymnasium. The use of small individual pieces assembled together to accrue substance, strength and extension seems a mirror of island community who built them. And an embodiment of shared knowledge of building from experienced people in the community. There is only one truss that still remains fully intact at this time.

The dormitory - four small rooms, each less than 9' wide, arranged enfilade - two pairs of rooms each with a shared bathroom in between. They represent the visitors who came to observe the programs of the Progressive Club and encourage their implementation elsewhere, and signify the influence this remote community had on the larger civil rights movement. Although these spaces no longer have a roof and the block walls and window opening are in various stages of deterioration the diminutive, spare spaces are visceral reminders of the sacrifices made by scores of individuals from all over this nation to attain equal rights and treatment for all citizens. In a sense the dormitories are an architectural manifestation of the goals and aspirations of the Progressive Club.

There are various doors and windows left partially or completely intact at this time. Some still have traces of the "haint" blue paint - a particular shade of blue/green significant to sea island traditions. Gullah lore suggests the blue doors and window frames kept spirits from entering buildings. Some bear the scars of past racial confrontations on the island including bullet holes from an incident following Robert Kennedy's assassination. The colors, the texture, the scars of these remaining fragments give a sense of the materiality and character of the original building. They also provide touchstones for specific moments in the history of the structure.



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MODES OF PERSISTENCE

Currently the organization is struggling with attempts at funding both renovation of the structure and continuing the education and community enhancing programs of the original organization. A traditional preservation trajectory for the site would involve restoring the structure to a fixed period, retaining as much of the existing fabric as possible and maintain the restored state into the future. This strategy would require vast resources the Club does not have. Given the deterioration of the existing structure there would not be a great deal of historic material to retain beyond the elements formally described. This strategy would also result in a museum type structure that would not appreciably contribute to the contemporary needs of the existing community that still faces significant economic and social challenges.

In the spring of 2012 the design studio at the Clemson Center for Architecture in Charleston under the direction of Professor Ray Huff evaluated the existing Progressive Club site and its potential for rehabilitation and continued use by the organization. They came to the following conclusions: This place is not recoverable from its current state and it can not function as it once did given new requirements of building codes and zoning regulations. Some of the limitations elaborated by the students: the slab elevation is lower than current design floor elevations for the area, the existing block walls cannot withstand the potential earthquakes that this area now has to design for, nor can they withstand the projected windloads of another hurricane. Additionally for a building to occupy this site it would need to be almost new from the foundation to the roof. And it could not be the same type of building as the original as the site area would not accommodate the parking for the anticipated functions of assembly and public events. While people once used this site came primarily on foot they all now would come by car, there is not enough space for parking. The students used this evaluation as an argument for exploring the construction of a new building on a larger site to support the continued civic functions of the Progressive Club Organization. All of the students provided architectural suggestions for how the original site might be turned into a memorial to the individuals who founded the club and the groundbreaking programs that they developed there.

Figure 4: Student work. Laura Lynn Hutton and Emily Schneck

While the concept of a memorial on the site is compelling the student projects tended to overlook the potential of remaining components to be incorporated into the memorial designs. They also did not address how a purely memorial site would be absorbed into the community. It doesn't seem that a purely architectural solution will work either in terms of preserving the existing structure or in an alternative use for the site. But in both their strategies for the memorial and the new building sited nearby lie the basis for a pair of possible avenues for preserving the Progressive Club site and its narrative.

With the challenges African Americans still face on Johns Island and the limitations on the existing site in terms of usable area and accessibility, retaining the site is not as high a priority as re-establishing a functioning community center. The transportable fragments of the original building that remain could be relocated to a new structure nearby. Day to day use might enlarge the sphere of contact for the fragments and the accompanying narrative while placing them within proximity of activities that perpetuate the civic principles of the original organization.

The progressive club was almost allowed to disappear, and now is held together with the fragile strands of narrative still retained by those with immediate knowledge of the club and its members. In traditionally oral culture where the historical record was held in voice - new items are continually added and things that are no longer useful fall out of usage and are allowed to "disappear". In order for the site to be used as a memorial it must be coupled with a reoccurring community event or activity that activates the site and reestablishes its place in the narrative of the community. Such cyclical celebrations might also incorporate actual retellings of the Progressive Club's origins. In this way the site would regain its visibility in the ongoing narrative of the place.

If the story of the Progressive Clubs inception began with a significant event and a place, then so might a narrative of its persistence. Any efforts at restoration need to involve immediacy of present action and a redefinition of site and its history within the larger context of the community and its day to day routine.

ENDNOTES

1. National Register of Historic Places, The Progressive Club, Johns Island, Charleston County, South Carolina, National Register #07001109, p.11.
2. Cross, Wilbur. *Gullah Culture in America*, Winston Salem, NC : John F. Blair, 2012. pp.173-174. Print.
3. Carawan, Guy and Candie. *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989. p.xiv.
4. Carawan. pp145-146. This is in a transcript of an interview with founder Easu Jenkins. This story was also relayed in multiple narratives shared with the author by members of the Johns Island Community.
5. Ong, J. W. *Orality and Literacy*. New York: Routledge Press, 1982. p.44.
6. Patricia, Guthrie. *Catching Sense*. Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1996. pp.36-37.
7. *National Register of Historic Places*. p.14.
8. *Carawan*. p.151.
9. *National Register of Historic Places*. p.15.
10. *Carawan*. p.142.
11. *National Register of Historic Places*. pp.6-7.