

Supporting Black Arts and Culture is Vital for All

Like many cities across the country, Seattle's history of inequity when it comes to access to real estate for Black people is still being felt today. Until the late 1960s, there were racist restrictions barring people of color from buying homes in most of the city, which led to the Central District becoming Seattle's Black neighborhood.

With that, it also became the epicenter of Black arts and culture. And that Black arts and culture was notably represented in a synagogue-turned-performing-arts-center named for the famed artist of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes.

Today, Langston is a non-profit with the mission to strengthen and advance community through Black arts and culture. Its vision is to cultivate Black brilliance.

According to its Executive Director, Tim Lennon, "we've manifested that vision in part by reinforcing the Central District as the cultural home of the Black community."

That's increasingly important as the demographic makeup of the Central District has dramatically shifted over the past several decades. According to data collected by the U.S. Census bureau as reported in the Seattle Times, more than 73 percent of the Central District's residents were Black in the 1970s. Today, it's fewer than 18 percent. The white population has climbed to nearly 60 percent.

So, if the Black community that was relegated to the Central District is now being priced out of that neighborhood, what happens to the legacy of Black art that still finds its cultural home there?

Lennon says they have taken a page from other areas that have faced similar gentrification, such as the International District. While the cultural heart may no longer be the residential heart of the communities that call them home, there is still a vibrant cultural scene that draws people in from surrounding areas.

"It's a unique time for the Black community in Seattle," Lennon added. "At the same time we've witnessed this decimation of the traditional Black community, there's also been a large influx of new Black residents in Seattle for tech jobs or other opportunities. These new Seattleites are coming here from different parts of the country trying to connect to where all the other Black people are."

Expanding the Mission

As Langston leans into the charge to "reinforce the Central District as the cultural home of the Black community," its programming has evolved and expanded. In addition to arts and culture events, it hosts community health, financial literacy, and alternative medicine events. There are youth camps and workshops for artists.

Of course, all of that has shifted dramatically since COVID.

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Like other community and arts organizations reliant upon in-person gatherings, Langston has had to pivot dramatically to find a new outlet for its mission in virtual spaces.

“Being in community when you can’t be together physically was a major mental shift for us,” Lennon continued. “As we’ve pivoted to virtual programming, we’ve learned a lot and, in some instances, have even been able to expand our audience to include people who may not have had the opportunity or ability to visit us in person for events in the past.”

One such event is the annual Seattle Black Film Festival. Last year the iconic festival that typically takes place in April was postponed to July and held online. With international content, it drew people from around the world who have never been able to attend in person. It also drew people from Seattle’s outlying neighborhoods, suburbs and exurbs — places where it can take upwards of an hour or more to drive from in pre-pandemic traffic.

This year, the Seattle Black Film Festival will once again be virtual, but it will return to its traditional April season – April 24-26 with tickets available for purchase in March at langstonseattle.org/SBFF.

Investing in the Future of Seattle’s Black Community

Last year, PPM began a relationship with Langston as part of our philanthropic mission. We look forward to building upon that relationship with volunteerism and financial investments. As a business, we believe that antiracism is a precondition for any conversation, endeavor or policy. A part of antiracism is acknowledging our past truth — however ugly — so that we can better understand how it has manifested itself in today’s lived Black experiences.

Real estate – residential and commercial – has been a part of what shaped the Central District to become the cultural heart of Seattle’s Black community. It is also a part of what is threatening that same community today. We have an obligation to be a part of ensuring its future.

With our headquarters in Seattle, we recognize that Black art and culture is embedded in the fabric of this city. As we continue to expand across the country, we see how deep a role Black culture and arts play in every city in America. And how closely it is tied to real estate.

In recognizing Black History Month, we draw attention to the opportunity we all have to acknowledge our past and invest in healing our future by learning more about Black arts and culture in our own communities, supporting local Black businesses, and donating both time and treasure to Langston’s eloquently stated vision – cultivating Black brilliance.