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## Exercise 1B: Harlem Mini Case Study

### Introduction and Thesis:

On 125th Street between Lexington Avenue and Third Avenue stands a construction site that reveals how easily Harlem's history and art can be hidden or erased. This site has been vacant and underutilized for around 9 years. The only service it provided for the community during this time was constant eyesores when people would pass it. With this, the Grandscale Mural Project transformed the dark green wooden construction walls into a vibrant outdoor gallery. Since 2019, a dozen artists annually paint these wooden walls to beautify the neighborhood and express themselves. However, with the new MTA project approaching, this vibrant artistic space that the community has utilized and built on for years is at risk of being removed, destroyed, and forgotten.

The new MTA project consists of extending the Q-Train line into East Harlem, and being that this site is large and has been vacant for years, it is a prime candidate for the MTA to use as a construction staging area or even a permanent ancillary facility (like a vent shaft or station entrance).

Through further research of this site, I found that beneath the same ground of these wooden murals lies the remains of a 19th-century open-cut train station. This station was built in 1873-1874 to replace a ground-level station that was built in 1844. The open-cut station extended from 115th Street to about 130th Street and was used for about twenty years. In the late 1880s, a federal project began to improve the navigation on the Harlem River, as the drawbridge had to open for all but the smallest of boats. Rather than keep the open trench, the railroad built a viaduct and a new station above it to accommodate a higher Harlem Bridge. The elevated station, which we know as the Harlem-125 Street station - Metro North railroad, opened on October 15, 1897, leaving the open-cut station abandoned and left as a basement under the new structure.

This site contains layers of history, infrastructure, abandonment, creativity, and redevelopment that raise fundamental questions about what and who is preserved in Harlem. My thesis is that this site exemplifies Radical Preservation because it shows how Harlem's layered history, from the forgotten 19th-century open-cut train station underground to the community-driven murals above, embodies memory, culture, and identity in both tangible and intangible forms. By connecting abandoned infrastructure with temporary art, this site challenges conventional preservation, showing that protecting a community's heritage requires more than safeguarding iconic architecture; it demands actively engaging with living, evolving histories, documenting the impermanent, and resisting erasure.

### Themes:

**Blackness / Otherness:** The murals represent Harlem's Black identity and culture. It provides the community a platform to voice their opinions, allowing them to communicate and celebrate current/ historical events within their neighborhood. Preserving these murals protects community voices that are often overlooked in urban planning and development.

**Erasure, Futurity, and Fabulation:** The abandoned open-cut train station underground represents past erasure, literally buried and forgotten. The murals above show the present-day risk of erasure, as they will be destroyed or taken once construction ends.

**Tangible vs. Intangible History:** The tangible layers include the painted murals, the open-cut train station underground, the present-day 125th train station above ground, and the construction site itself. The intangible layers include stories of what once were there and artistic expression.

### What is at stake?:

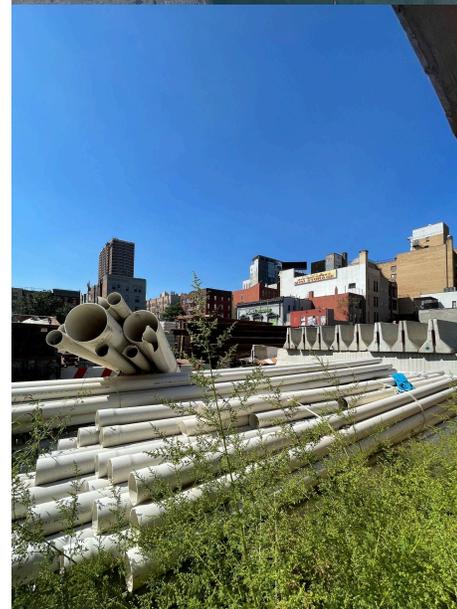
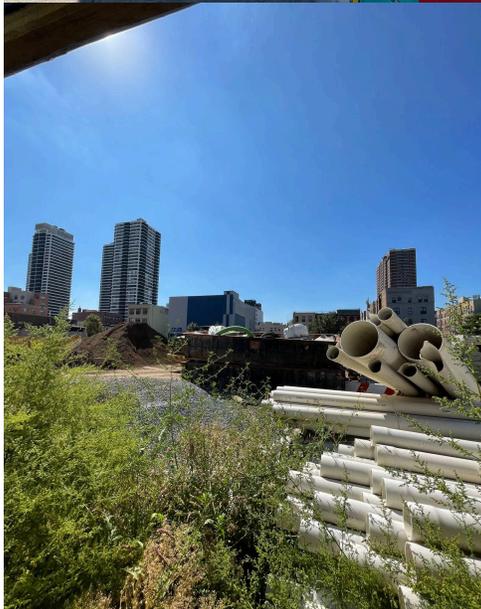
Harlem's living cultural identity is at stake. If the murals vanish without recognition and the station remains buried, we lose both animate and inanimate forms of history. Without Radical Preservation, the histories of everyday Harlem, its stores, community art, and infrastructure risk being forgotten forever.

### Supporting Elements:

The story of this block connects Harlem's past and present, starting with the abandoned open-cut train station that has been buried, built over, and forgotten. Then the Pathmark supermarket, which was a community necessity lost in 2015 and replaced with the present-day murals, which are now at risk of being removed for the subway expansion project.

### Conclusion:

This site is far more than art on wooden walls or an abandoned train station underground. It is another example of a community's history, culture, and identity facing erasure. Radical Preservation encourages us to read these layers together, recognizing that preserving a place means protecting not just its architecture, but also the memories, everyday practices, and lived experiences that define it.



Sources:

[https://www.harlemworldmagazine.com/the-harlem-rail-road-open-cut-1871/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.harlemworldmagazine.com/the-harlem-rail-road-open-cut-1871/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)