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Radical Preservation
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Exercise 1b
Part B: Revisited Argument and Written Reflection

125th Street between Lexington and Park Avenue



On 125th Street between Lexington and Park Avenue, the Metro-North viaduct casts a constant shadow over a corridor defined as much by resilience as by erasure. Beneath its steel arches, vendors sell oils, incense, and T-shirts printed with Pan-African icons; storefront churches fill the block with gospel music and sermons that spill onto the sidewalk; preachers and passersby engage in heated debates that momentarily transform the street into a public stage. Yet this same stretch bears the marks of absence of vacant lots where urban renewal demolished housing, rising commercial rents that drive out small Black-owned businesses, and rezoning strategies that promise “revitalization” but often accelerate displacement. These contradictions pose a central question: how can preservation address such a space, where the cultural heartbeat is lived, fleeting, and collective, but the physical landscape is under constant threat?

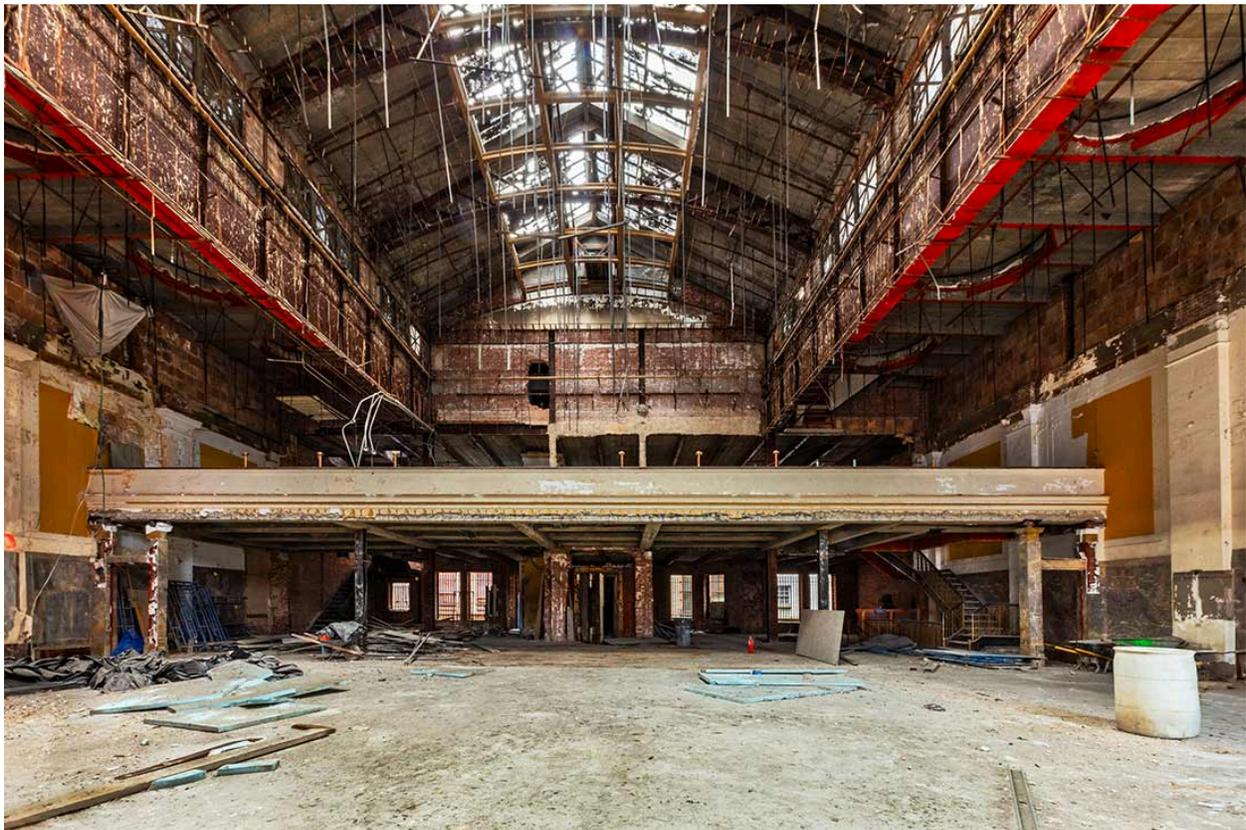
The concept at stake here is radical preservation, a practice that resists traditional, state-sanctioned frameworks of “heritage” and instead centers community-defined value, intangible culture, and Black futurity. Radical preservation opens the possibility of recognizing

Harlem not simply through its landmarked buildings, but through the everyday practices, soundscapes, and collective memories that give the corridor its meaning.

The themes of this case study, Blackness and otherness; erasure, futurity, and fabulation; preservation vs. “heritage”; tangible vs. intangible histories; and capitalism and the market, demonstrate how 125th Street embodies the need for an expanded framework of preservation. They show that what is most vital about Harlem is often what risks being erased, overlooked, or commodified in the name of progress.

What is at stake is more than a row of buildings: it is the survival of Harlem as a living archive of Black cultural presence. If preservation continues to privilege monuments over memory and market value over community life, the histories of resistance and everyday survival that define this corridor may disappear.

To support this argument, I will be exploring this area making notes on what is already there and what is continuing to be removed. Harlems Savings Bank for example might not be a culturally significant place but it does hold the remains of what was once occupying Harlem and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Yet, today plans are going on to demolish this building and for it to become a nine story building with retail and offices. It is being backed by MTAs 2nd avenue subway project and displays how everything in this area will soon disappear.



Ultimately, this paper argues that radical preservation on 125th Street means refusing to fix Harlem’s past in amber for tourist consumption and instead affirming preservation as the safeguarding of lived practices, community memory, and Black futurity. In conclusion, I will suggest that this approach extends beyond Harlem: it offers a model for rethinking preservation in other contexts where marginalized communities are threatened by erasure, whether in East Harlem, the Bronx, or global sites where capitalism and redevelopment endanger intangible forms of cultural life.

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Harlem Savings Bank Demolished today.