

# PRECIOUS PLACES: A GRASSROOTS WAY OF SEEING

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and Martha Wallner

**As he guides us on an unofficial tour, longtime resident and activist Mike Hagan reveals his dizzying knowledge of Camden, N.J.** He points out the old Victor Talking Machine Company building, now being converted to luxury lofts, and the collection of '20s- and '30s-era bronze sculptures in Johnson Park. "I have Camdenitis," he says. "It's a terminal disease."

Hagan is playing on the media's tendency to portray Camden, just across the Delaware River from Philadelphia, as a blighted dumping ground you'd have to be sick to love. "The descriptions are always derogatory," he says, recounting stories laden with images of "weed-choked lots," "worthless" homes and "contaminated" factories. Contesting such images is a matter of personal dignity for Hagan, who has good reasons to keep track of what reporters are saying. In 2004 policymakers labeled his neighborhood, Cramer Hill, "not a viable community," and added his home to a list of 1,200 slated for demolition in a major redevelopment scheme called the Cherokee Plan. Grasping the urgency of generating alternative narratives, Hagan and activists from two community groups, Camden United and the Cramer Hill Residents Association, turned to Precious Places.

Initiated by the Scribe Video Center, Precious Places is a community media project that helps Philadelphia-area residents use video to take control of how their neighborhoods are represented. *Pride of the Hill*, the first video made by Camden activists

in 2006, depicts Cramer Hill as a vibrant place worth preserving. Local residents describe the area's wildlife, including a habitat for endangered eagles. Over a shot of the gently flowing Delaware River near his home, Hagan explains, "The waves of the water kind of let all your troubles go away," adding, "It's the Camden that nobody knows." Shots of thriving local businesses contest claims of commercial stagnation. Resident Antonia Sanchez explains what attracted her to Cramer Hill: "At the time I was a single parent and I found a home that was affordable. It was a shell, but it was something that I could keep and a roof over my children's heads."

After the Cramer Hill Residents Association succeeded in stalling the Cherokee Plan, they decided to produce a second Precious Places project, *The Rebirth of Johnson Park*, which premiered this year. (The films screen on public television in Philadelphia, at community events and online.) In this video residents recount the city's industrial accomplishments, and celebrate the restored park as a symbol of resilience. "It was such an oasis in the middle of despair," notes activist Mary Cortes, who learned through her work with Precious Places that the industrialist Eldridge R. Johnson built the park for workers and their families. "We need more places like that," she adds.

Scribe founder Louis Massiah started Precious Places in 2002 to document neighborhood history that was threatened by Philadelphia's controversial Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, a plan to assemble parcels of land for predominantly market-rate developers through city investment and wide-scale demolition. The initiative grew out of Massiah's commitment to teaching media skills to "scholars without portfolios," regular citizens whose expertise is based on simply living in their communities over long periods of time. "In Philadelphia, his-

tory is currency," Massiah says. "Philly makes a lot of money off its historical sites — the Liberty Bell, the Constitution." Sites outside this official history, with no obvious tie to commerce, are often viewed as worthless. By supporting community interpretations of local sites, Precious Places helps residents redefine their neighborhoods as historically relevant. This is an important step in reshaping planning debates around a more meaningful picture of neighborhood needs. During the production process, participants also learn important skills that contribute to their effectiveness as community organizers, such as how to conduct oral history interviews and archival research.

In the near future, the shrinkage of local reporting in the dying newspaper industry may mean people will look more to projects like Precious Places to enlarge their picture of urban life. Precious Places also suggests a good model for planning practice by recognizing that planners, politicians and developers don't necessarily see what residents on the ground see, know what residents know or want what residents want. And their plans often fail to deliver promised outcomes: Research by activist and urban planner Tom Knoche has demonstrated, for example, that millions of dollars of investment in the redevelopment of the Camden waterfront yielded far fewer jobs and less tax revenues than projected. Precious Places identifies the community and institutional structures that sustain people, and asks how we can nurture them.

The inscriptions on the granite friezes of Camden City Hall, as shown in *Pride of the Hill*, playfully provide admonishments to decision-makers. On our tour Hagan excitedly recites his favorite: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." As their videos make clear, Cramer Hill residents have vision. The question over the coming months is: Will their vision prevail? x