

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Shanna Sabio

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Shanna Sabio conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on October 9, 2023. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Shanna Sabio was born and raised in Brooklyn around her large extended family, who lived close together on Hart Street in Bushwick in a series of properties her grandfather purchased. Her grandmother often told her stories of her ancestors in Panama, and Sabio says, "her storytelling helped me to see how beautiful and personal history could be." After growing her love of experiential storytelling while working in corporate fashion, Sabio started to look around at Bed-Stuy, where she then lived with her son, and to imagine how she could develop a program for young people that fostered connections to history and creativity in place. These ideas would eventually become GrowHouse Design and Development Group, an organization she co-founded with her son in 2017 to support inclusive neighborhoods where Black communities can thrive through opportunities for land ownership and stewardship. As an outgrowth of Growhouse's programs, Sabio also became involved with the Flatbush African Burial Ground Coalition, where she is a co-trustee, and the Reimagine Lefferts Initiative, where she sits on its advisory council.

In this interview, Sabio talks about community land trusts, Growhouse's emerging model of collective ownership of land, public education around relationships to money and wealth, impacts of gentrification and displacement, and intergenerational leadership. She also describes details relating to the Flatbush African Burial Ground, including the proposal by the Department of Housing, Preservation, and Development to develop affordable housing on the site, the community engagement process initiated by the Parks Department, the roles of local officials, approaches to commemorating the site's history, and her advocacy for leadership by people of African descent.

Transcriptionist: Azure Bourne

Session: 1

Interviewee: Shanna Sabio

Location: video call

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic

Date: October 9, 2023

Q: Today is October 9, 2023, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Shanna Sabio for the New York Preservation Archive Project. It's also Indigenous Peoples Day, and we are on seized Lenape land, connecting remotely via video call. Can you start by saying your name, and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Sabio: Yeah. So my name is Shanna Sabio. I am co-founder and co-director of GrowHouse Community Design and Development Group. I am a mother of three adult children, and I live in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, also on unceded Lenape land.

Q: Thank you. Can you tell me about where you grew up and what that place was like?

Sabio: Yeah, sure. So I was born in Brownsville at Woodhull Hospital—not Woodhull, I'm sorry. I was born in Brownsville and I was raised in Bushwick on Hart Street, between Bushwick and Evergreen. And I was born in 1973, so I grew up in Brooklyn in the '80s, when it was not so nice. There were some nice parts, but also some parts that were pretty frightening. The crack era began to hit in the early '80s, and so the neighborhood really started changing and shifting, and becoming kind of a shadow of its former self. And so navigating Brooklyn during that time was beautiful, and at the same time, you know, a little bit daunting as a young Black girl.

My parents were born in Panama, and came to the country, to the United States, in the late '60s. My mom settled in Brownsville on Bristol Street, and my dad lived in Bushwick, along with his family, a large extended family. So I grew up kind of in a household compound. Yeah, my granddad, Robert, had bought four houses on the same block, on Hart Street, and every time someone would come up from Panama, they would have a place to be in. It was normally one of those four houses, so there were lots of cousins, and aunts, and uncles, and grandparents around. So even though Brooklyn felt a little scary, it still felt safe on that one little stretch of land.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about what your parents and your extended family did to get settled, and how they were able to acquire property, which is such a challenge. Just a little bit more about your background, and how your family set their roots down in Brooklyn.

Sabio: Yeah. It's a marvel to me how my grandfather was able to purchase land, but he seemed to be a very tenacious and resourceful person. He was actually born in the Bahamas, on a small set of islands—I think the specific island was Cat Island—and he left home at the age of fifteen, and moved to Nassau, which was the bigger island. And then from Nassau he moved to Panama, where he was able to work. He fixed cars and he also did a lot of other odd jobs. I think he probably saved his money. So he came and he bought the homes from Italian immigrants, who were in the midst of white flight. You know, there was a lot of Puerto Rican people that were moving on the block, Black people from the Caribbean, and so I think they just wanted to get out. He was able to negotiate a deal from two Italian sisters, apparently, and once he bought the first house, then he was able to buy the house next door, as people started to sell. He was just always prepared somehow; I'm not sure how. I never got a chance to ask him how he was able to

do that. But I also suspect that, you know, all the people who came to live with him, once they found jobs, were probably paying him some money in order to stay in the space. So he was able to gather some money, and any time an opportunity came up, would purchase when he could.

In terms of getting settled, I know on my mom's side of the family, who resided in Brownsville, one of my aunts was the first person to come. She worked as a live-in nanny for a family in Manhasset, but had to escape pretty much because they had taken her passport. And in addition to just taking care of the children, she was also being asked to cook, clean, do a lot of other jobs that weren't really a part of her duties, and was being treated pretty badly. She always tells the story of how she left the house with very little with her, because she just felt like she needed to escape the situation. She was able to get a nursing job, and then after she became a nurse, started to send for other people. I think my grandmom came up next, and then when my grandmom came up, my mom came up. So one by one, people would come up as money was accumulated.

And I think part of how folks settled was community bonds were much stronger then. Parties were a big thing. I remember having or taking part in lots of parties. Those parties would be times when everyone would get together. All the children would be able to congregate, and share, and just have a good time with one another. And funerals, of course, were other times. You know, those milestones, like marriages, births, baby showers, those were really community celebrations. And some of that feels like it's been lost, as people have moved away from New York, and built lives elsewhere. So yeah, I think that was one way that folks were able to get acclimatized to a new neighborhood.

Q: What was your sense of history, or relationship to history when you were young? Or how did history kind of circulate, or stories circulate in your family?

Sabio: Hmm. I hated history in school [laughs]. But my grandmother, on my dad's side, was a wonderful storyteller, and she would always tell me stories of where she came from. She too— Panama was one of those really interesting places if you want to talk about a melting pot of Black culture. So her family came from an archipelago called San Andrés, in Providencia, which belonged to Colombia, but really were contested. Raizales were the people who lived there. They see themselves as independent. They are largely English speaking, Black, and so she would tell me stories of that island so often, of what it was like, how lush and beautiful it was, to the point where I was like, “Well, why did you come here?” [laugh] “And why did you go to Panama?”

But her storytelling helped me to see how beautiful and personal history could be. She would tell me things like her last name was Hawkings. Sarah Hawkings was her name. And she would tell me how The Hawkings were descended from pirates. The pirates had put up a stronghold on Old Providence on Providencia, and that there was treasure hidden on the island that folks would often go in search of in the mountains, because they believed that the pirates stashed some things around. And I think she also told me about how her uncles were sailors. And when I went to go visit the island when I turned forty, that definitely was true. There's a strong sailing tradition in the family. Her family members were also known to be lobster divers, so they would be able to dive under the water and get lobster without any equipment. I saw that real-time as well. So her stories actually brought a lot of history to life for me. I imagined, you know, this pirate stronghold in the middle of the Caribbean, and visiting the island, it gave me a sense of magic,

just thinking about the stories that she told me. Yeah, that's how history came to life, back in the day.

Q: That sounds pretty exciting. Can you tell me why you hated history as a subject in school?

Sabio: Yeah. I could never get the dates down [laughs], cause it was all about dates when I was growing up. And so, it just seemed really boring to me, and it didn't seem like it connected to me. And I think there were some moments that I felt history really come to life. And those didn't really happen in school. So I remember when *Roots* aired on television. And I remember our entire family sitting down to watch it and we were riveted by the stories. That was a time when I was like, "Oh, history could be cool." I even named my first dog, Kizzy, after one of the characters. But when I got to school, I didn't feel that same excitement. It didn't seem connected to me, or my family, in a way that made sense, or felt exciting.

Q: Yeah, true. I think a lot of people still struggle with that even all these years later, and I say that also, as being someone who's really involved in history now. So, I want to ask about how you got invested in activities that were dedicated to community preservation—or whatever term might feel right for you for that?

Sabio: I kind of see it as a long time coming. I don't know if you've ever had the feeling that all things in your life have led to a certain moment, even the hard times. So for me, I really started thinking about history more deeply when, I would say, when my grandmom died. Because I was at the time away in college, in Atlanta. And I remember feeling a sense of loss that I hadn't been

able to gather more of the stories that she held. Another thing that she would do is she would recount what siblings' names. She was really like a family genealogist. And so I was able to piece together our family tree, just based off of having conversations with her. She would always recite their names. She was one of twelve, and their names were on the tips of her tongue all the time. And so when she died, this family archive was kind of lost, especially with everyone having dispersed. We have family members in California, Germany, all over the place, and there are very few people who still reside in Bushwick. I don't think there are any, any more. So that anchor was lost, and I wanted to really try to see if I could continue that legacy. I've always felt kind of connected to her. She was born on November 14th, I'm born on November 18th. We were very close. And so, when she passed, that was one of the reasons why I went to visit those islands that she told me about. And in being there, I got to see these histories come to life, and so I think that was the start.

Then I was working in corporate fashion [laughs] for a couple of brands for a while, and I was doing education work there. That's when I kind of fell in love with storytelling, in a lot of different forms—whether it be visual storytelling or experiential storytelling. One of the things that I had to do, that was part of my role, was store sets. So, you know, me going to a department store, there's so much work—or any store—there's so much work that goes into the merchandising of it. And some of that has historical component to it, where you look at what's been done before, you try to add new elements, you create an experience for the customer. And I was tasked with educating store associates on that, through video, through print, in different means. And that's when I really got to see how storytelling could shift the way that people behave in environments. So that was another piece.

And then, you know, when I lost my job during the recession of 2008, I really—I had a little bit of a crisis. I was living in a very, very old brownstone at the time. It was really decrepit. And I started to research the history of that brownstone, trying to see ways that I could tap into getting some funds to renovate it. And all of these pieces of history kind of started to congeal and solidify, to the point when, in 2017, I, financially, was falling apart, and ended up having to sell that house, or start the process of selling that house.

My son and his friends had been congregating in the house for a while. We started to think of how do we provide a space for them, because they were doing tons of creative things: creating films, painting, etc. So that's when GrowHouse was born, the idea for it. And started to look about finding funds to start that work in earnest. And so I guess history came into that because the neighborhood was changing. And trying to figure out how can we remain, and how can we claim a piece of it, I started really digging deeper into Bed-Stuy history, visiting Weeksville, seeing the connections there. And yeah, let's see, what else. How else did history come to life?

So in 2017, we started GrowHouse. In 2018, we were kind of thinking about creating a gap-year program for young people like him who weren't in school, or weren't working, didn't really want to go to school. Just wasn't sure about whether or not school was a great investment of time and money. And we went to Cuba, and in Cuba, history is all around you. It's so evident, right. You look at the old buildings, you see people preserving their culture. And so that started to spark some ideas. In 2019, we went to Ghana to do very similar things, like travel and experience different cultures, and learn about African retention. And then 2020, when the pandemic hit, we

couldn't travel. We actually were planning to go, in 2020, to Ghana, Benin, Togo, and Nigeria, and had started doing some of the legwork in 2019.

And in 2020, when the pandemic hit, we just decided that, okay, we need to really think back to our roots, ancestrally, having family members who were able to steward property and hold property. How do we create opportunities for young people in gentrified neighborhoods to do the same and to create a similar model as what my granddad did. Because part of what he did was, he bought four homes. But soon as his kids were able to manage, he would sell them to them. So my dad owned one of the homes, two of my aunts owned one home in common, and then an uncle owned another one. And I saw firsthand how that was able to give people a leg up, and actually a start. And was thinking, I would love to provide that for my children in some way. Yeah. So in 2020, we started to really think about property, and how young people could become owners, and that's when our work around community land trusts began.

And in looking for land that was owned by the city, to put into a community land trust, we came across the Flatbush African Burial Ground. And it wasn't really clearly promoted that this was an African Burial Ground. And being as inquisitive and—I'm a researcher, I think, at heart—I just started to think about slavery in New York, which was something that I hadn't really learned existed in school, at the time that I was learning history. I started thinking about who lived there, what kind of lives they were living, and that's when the walking tours came into being, was through that research and figuring out ways to share it. Not in the same stuffy ways that I had experienced in school, but in ways that would bring history to life in space. And so walking around, and engaging with the environment became the mode for me to deliver history to other

people. And that's kind of how I got started. Long story [laugh].

Q: [Laugh] I think it's often a long story. I mean, when you have to work for it, I think. I have a question about what it was like for you, in that moment you described of thinking about your home, and your interest in the history of it, and trying to restore it—in that transition of thinking about, how do I make this public, kind of outside of my home, and something that other people can engage with? I mean, person-to-person, like, how did you do that? What was that like? What were some of the components of that? I know you had, as you said, you had worked in business and in corporate environments. But what else was part of kind of deciding to like flip it into a kind of a different-facing project?

Sabio: I mean, I think a part of it was grief. Because I knew that I wasn't going to be able to afford to remain in the home. And I processed some of that grief by trying to stay connected in any way that I could. Both by physically renovating it, to get it ready for sale. And as we would renovate, it's interesting, we would find newspapers. People would use newspapers in really interesting ways back in the day [laughs]. Underneath linoleum, and things like that. And so, it was just kind of like, wow. This is something that you don't really think of as you're in a home. All of the different layers of history. And the home that we were in was built before 1899, so it had a hundred-plus years of history embedded in the walls.

And I think how it became more public-facing for me is, it wasn't in that house. That house was in such bad condition. I was talking with a friend about it last night, that it really shaped the way that our family interacted with each other, and with others, where we would never invite people

over to that house, because it was always in a state of disrepair. There was always something going on. And now, looking back at it, just seeing these points of community, and how important home is, and how it can shape relationships, I always think about. But that said, it became more public after we left. And I started thinking more about spaces in general, and how they make people feel. My son and co-founder definitely was impacted by living in that home, and has always been thinking about space because of it. And so he also is really obsessed, in some ways, with how color, light, texture, environment can make you feel, or not feel.

And so in working through my grief, and seeing how our neighborhood was changing, having to move to Flatbush and be uprooted, it made me think about other people who might be experiencing grief around gentrification. The Burial Ground was a really strong case for that because it was slated to become affordable housing, and when we started looking at affordability standards, we realized that it was probably gonna be a point of displacement. So the feeling of preventing affordable housing on that particular site, got really strong. And hearing people come on the tours, and talk about their grief at how the neighborhood was changing and shifting, and how they weren't feeling welcome or at home in some ways, made this public exposition of history. I really believe that one of the ways that gentrification works is by erasing people in space, and creating this clean slate, where people who are also being displaced oftentimes can come and paint their own dreams. It's a tragedy that those visions and hopes that people have for their neighborhood can't remain, and that they can't remain in their space. And that's really—it's really personal work in terms of still navigating grief. I was in Bedford-Stuyvesant last night and saw how the neighborhood has changed. But also seeing people who were able to remain, it made me happy and sad, simultaneously. And I'm still trying to figure out ways to get back

there.

Q: Let's talk about the community stewardship and community land ownership aspect of GrowHouse's initiative. Can you talk from, I guess, a practical, or a technical perspective, about what those initiatives are, and how you and GrowHouse are working to bring those goals to fruition?

Sabio: I'm in the process of creating a few structures, legal structures, that can facilitate collective ownership of land and real estate, as well as cultural institutions and artist production, in Brooklyn. We're looking at community the land trust as one of those structures and have begun to draft our bylaws, and have assembled a steering committee to help us come up with how we're gonna operate within the CLT structure. We're also looking at some crowdfunding through the Securities Exchange Commission that will enable us to gather funds from people who want to remain, or have been pushed out, or are living in Central Brooklyn so that we could crowdfund and create the portfolio of properties that will be owned in community, and that will provide passive income—at first in small trickles. We'll probably have to repay debt for a good portion of that. But at a certain point, we're hoping it could become a way of closing some of the racial wealth gap. It won't close all, but beginning to do that work.

New York, as a speculative real estate market—it's a double-edged sword, right. Because within that speculation, there are families who are able to build generational wealth, and then at the same token, displacement comes along with that. So we're trying to strike a middle balance between providing some revenue to residents that isn't extractive. In practicality ways of

thinking, we just had our advisory council meeting, one of them this weekend, and we're talking about different tiers of ownership within a structure, specifically not the CLT structure, but the structure that will generate some profits. And we're talking about people who are residents having a certain kind of ownership with certain decision-making capacity. And they will probably have the most decision-making, cause they're living inside of the space, and we want to empower people who are most impacted. We're talking about staff owners; myself and my son, Warner, are two staff members. We're hoping to bring more staff on to support this work, and we want the staff to be able to own where they work. Then community owners would be people who live within our catchment area, which includes Central Brooklyn, Clinton Hill, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Ocean Hill, Prospect Lefferts Gardens, Crown Heights, and portions of Bushwick. So people who are living within [audio distortion], not residing in a GrowHouse property, will also be able to own. And then finally, investor-owners. And we see these people as folks who maybe got displaced, but still have a love for, and a connection to Brooklyn. They will probably have the least amount of decision-making, because they're not in the neighborhood anymore. But we still want people to feel a sense of stewardship of places where they used to be.

And so that's kind of where we are. There'll be a CLT, and then there will also be—we're leaning towards a cooperative, a real estate cooperative, or trust of some sort. And those two will be paired together to keep things affordable, while also providing some revenue for folks.

Q: Can you talk about some of the other—I mean, what I'm thinking about is how the model that you're setting for GrowHouse and for Black and African American families is different from some of the other community land trusts in the city, where they are—I think limited-equity is the

term, right, where you can't sell it for profit. However, you're mentioning the importance of something like passive income. So can you talk about how this model is specific to the, and I guess, addresses the wealth gap in this country?

Sabio: We really are seeing it as GrowHouse's work is shifting into creating a cultural and economic ecosystem, and these collective ownership structures also will form an ecosystem. So the first point will be to stabilize folks, right. So on CLT land, most likely there will be permitted [audio distortion] sorts of building structures on top of that. Because it's not about generating income at that point; it's about stabilizing people who want to remain, using highly affordable, deeply affordable housing models, renting, probably, maybe some co-op ownership. Once people have gotten stable, and if they want to advance into something that will generate some income, then these other structures will come into play, where they can begin to invest in buildings in the portfolio. And even, I'm hoping that, at first, for some folks, it might be a way of saving money for a down payment on a house, or on an apartment.

I'm also hoping that people will collectively decide to purchase buildings together, because that also raises affordability for folks. And so if they can collectively own together, stabilize even further, then maybe they can think about getting an income-producing property. So it really is about creating a pathway. And we're not expecting to generate tons of income for folks right out the gate. But really want to use this multi-tiered approach, cause these problems are complex, and I don't think any simple answer is going to solve. We need a little bit of complexity to be able to get folks to remain, and then thrive, and be able to save and generate income in ways.

And then tied to that, we're thinking about how, within our LLC—cause we're currently an LLC, we're filing our 501c3 paperwork—how do we build worker ownership into everything that we do, and make it so that our work is decided democratically. We're an intergenerational organization, so there are a lot of learnings that we're learning as myself and my son work together. How do we make sure that decision-making brings people from the margins into the center? Sometimes because he's younger than I am, he experiences ageism, reverse ageism, where people don't necessarily respect his role. And so how do we begin to dismantle some of that as a young person? Him being in rooms—as a young Black man, him being in rooms can be disruptive. So I think the ownership piece, and making sure decision-making is democratic, is gonna be infused throughout all, and hopefully, it'll be a model that can be replicated in places that are feeling the same. And we can [audio distortion] for folks to do that work as well, so we're not reinventing the wheel.

Q: Is GrowHouse the only organization that's doing this kind of multi-tiered plan, or are there other organizations that are looking into community land trusts, or have community land, that you can look to for guidance, or models that work?

Sabio: Well, in terms of a multi-tiered piece, I think the closest organization is in Atlanta, The Guild. I actually have been reaching out to so many different organizations doing similar work, whether it be through mixed income neighborhood trust, or all kinds of trust models. There are so many out there. But The Guild, I believe, is also looking at multiple structures. I actually met with one of the staff there, and we're planning to build a deeper partnership. Because they have a lot of learning that we could gather, and that way we'll avoid some pitfalls along the way. But

here in New York, I don't think there are other organizations doing it in quite the same way that we're looking at doing it.

Q: What about the education component of GrowHouse's activities. Can you talk about that curriculum that you're developing?

Sabio: Yeah. So in fall of last year, we started to pilot some ideas that we had had. While my family did own real estate, they didn't really have a full grasp of how to transmit the knowledge that they had gathered to us. So I wasn't really good with money, and I'm still learning some of the foundations of the way our financial system works. And so we piloted a program called Spirit in Currency, which was really about healing relationships to money, and understandings of money. Because if we're going to generate this wealth, we have to—I believe we have to—make sure that we also support people healing their relationship to money and wealth. And in doing this work, we really started to notice that there's a lot of trauma around money for communities of color, specifically, but I think, nationwide, the way that capitalism has been working to keep people feeling consistently precarious has ruined relationships. And we heard stories about that, whether it be whenever someone dies, there's always some sort of financial squabble that happens. And so people begin to feel that money is not something that they should have, whether it's subconscious or fully conscious. And if we're gonna have people building wealth, we want folks to be able to retain it, and to also have frank conversations about money. We learned that secrecy is a big problem in communities. Shame is a big problem. People who are poor tend to feel a sense of shame about being poor, and that somehow, it is their fault, even if they are extremely hard working. So we've been trying to disrupt those narratives. That's one piece of the

education.

And then the other piece is about connecting Black people, specifically, Indigenous people, and all people, to the legacy of Black people in New York and in the United States, as generators of wealth. So if we can connect to the idea that the economy of New York was built on the labor of Black people, it will disrupt some of these ideas of African American people being lazy, not being industrious, not able to make money. History is gonna be key to healing some of those narratives, as is the history of cross-racial collaboration. You know, the end of enslavement would have been much more difficult here in New York City, had it not been for white abolitionists who were willing to put their lives and their livelihoods on the line. So in reclaiming the history of enslavement, we're not only reclaiming one of America's original sins, right, including the attempted genocide of Indigenous People, but the other original sin is the enslavement of Africans, and the consistent stealing of their wealth. So if we can confront those painful histories, as well as the hopeful histories of collaboration, then I can see a shift happening in society. So that's why it's really important for us to do this work around education.

Q: What are some of the other organizations that you are involved in that are also about giving light to the true narrative, or changing the narrative?

Sabio: Hmm. So I would say the Laundromat Project, for sure. This year, myself, along with three other GrowHouse advisory council members, are artists in residence at the Laundromat Project for what we're calling the Black Utopia Project. And we're really trying to catalyze Black-led staying power in New York City, and doing that through art. I think in New York, art

can kind of become another commodity, as opposed to a vehicle for change, which is what it has been: a vehicle to be seen, a vehicle for people to heal themselves in their communities. And so, using art in this way, I think is really important, and the Laundromat Project has been a great home for that.

Also, I've been on the advisory council for the Reimagine Lefferts Initiative, which is where the historic Lefferts house, a site of enslavement, is reimagining their museum and moving it from the typical period rooms of museums, and figuring out ways to really include contemporary issues in their exhibits, and engaging communities in really rich and robust ways, which I love. I love being a part of that initiative, and seeing how things are coming into fruition. It's been a great learning for how I would love for things to unfold at GrowHouse.

And then finally, we were selected as part of Urban Design Forums, and Association for Neighborhood Housing and Development's program, called Local Center. And Local Center's really about reimagining the ways that communities can shape public space. So we're gonna be working around the Flatbush African Burial Ground to create some activations at that site, that will support the work that we have been doing in producing the walking tours, putting art up on the fences, engaging the higher ed institutions, such as Parsons, to bringing students into the history of this site, and imagining ways that would not be the typical memorials, right? I think our community needs to reimagine beyond granite as memorial, and into things that would really shift the way that people see memorialization. So we partnered with Kinfolk, which is a technology company, to create digital monuments in augmented reality. Doing things like that, where it really can shift the way that people see monumentation and documentation. So yeah,

that part has been exciting. Those are the three things that I would say.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about why these other forms of monumentation, and celebrating peoples and sites that have not been part of the history is significant, especially to people who've been pushed to the margins? I think not everyone has an understanding of why this is important. It will be wonderful to hear you explain it from your perspective.

Sabio: Yeah. I think monumentation should be hyperlocal, in my opinion. And while there's a certain visual language that nods to places of importance, like statues, etc., in Flatbush, specifically, where it can get really hot and there are very few green spaces outside of Prospect Park, I think it's time for us to reimagine what monumentation can look like, what monuments can look like. Because on the site like the Flatbush African Burial Ground, digging into the ground has very important ramifications in terms of what remains lie there. How are those remains gonna be treated. And in visiting the Lower Manhattan African Burial Ground, the mounds that they have reinterred remains in is a great nod, but it doesn't really do much for me, personally. I think what takes up a lot of space and imagination are those, you know, the Arc of Freedom, etc., and I don't think that every monument for an African Burial Ground needs to look like that one. We can do things that reclaim in space as part of history, have Indigenous and African herbs planted along a corridor, that will also mark a space as a site of history. We can have signage, we can engage technology, while still making sure that it's acknowledged that this space is important. So yeah, I just think it's time for a new imagining, especially with monuments being toppled all over the United States. Like can we do something else? Can we do something that's living, and able to evolve and change, and shift, and that is stewarded by

community, and builds community relationships and resiliency. That's kind of what I see the African Burial Ground has a potential for.

Q: I really love that green space and the ecological aspects as a form of honoring the past and also just—you know, this is the place. This is how the place looks, indigenous plants and that true ecology. So let's talk a little bit more about the Flatbush African Burial Ground. So I have read the open letter to officials on the GrowHouse blog, which is just an exceptionally clear account of how things have unfolded there. Can you give, I guess, a summary of how you've been involved, and some of the issues that have come up, and have been identified by the descendant community?

Sabio: Yeah. So, our mission in 2021, we were looking for land to form a part of this community land trust and came across the African Burial Ground information, started doing research. There was already a group that was organizing around the burial grounds that was a group of gardeners and local residents, and they were proposing a fund on the burial ground. And while I felt as though a farm was an option—I think it's an option—the part that was troublesome to me was that there wasn't really people of African descent leading in that coalition. And it is an African Burial Ground, so it makes sense that African peoples be leading that. Then the other piece of it is, most of the community did not know that it was an African Burial Ground. And so my thought was to really educate folks, who every time I would do a walking tour would say, "I didn't know it was an African Burial Ground. I had no idea." "I went to Erasmus, and I did not know." "I teach right down the block, and I did not know." To inform people like that. So that when it came a chance to really begin a community visioning process about what could be there,

all voices were heard, specifically voices of people of African descent.

So I joined that group, was kind of recruited for leadership because I was one of the few Black people who were engaged with the group. So I started out as the leader of that coalition for six months, while we were fighting HPD [Department of Housing, Preservation, and Development]. And we used a variety of techniques to raise awareness, including the walking tours, the art making, days of action and being out at the site, teach-ins with Dr. Michael Blakey and others who had been involved in the Lower Manhattan African Burial Ground, just teach-ins in general, including volunteers, a direct action at City Hall. And so were finally able to stop the RFP from happening, at which point—I think he was then Borough President—Eric Adams made a public statement saying that he was not gonna support an HPD affordable housing development there. Bill de Blasio also did, and then there was radio silence after those decisions were made.

We wanted to take some time because we did realize there was a changing of the guard that was happening. Eric Adams was moving into his mayorship, Council Member Rita Joseph was stepping into her council woman status, there were a lot of changes happening. Antonio Reynoso was stepping into his role. So we wanted to give some time for folks to settle in as the coalition kept reaching out to see what was happening. We would get very vague answers until it was announced that, number one, there was a task force that was being gathered, a new form of a task force—cause there was already a task force with Community Board 14—that new members were being put on that task force. They did not reach out to any of us from the coalition, even though we asked to be on that task force. Then after that, there was a task force meeting, and they announced that the land had been moved to Parks Department. And that was not announced, or

there was no sort of discussion with the descendant community about that. So I think at that point, community residents were really confused and beginning to feel distrustful because of all of the history of having to do direct action, having to really be very vocal about the African Burial Ground. And then, with that distrust, has been disillusionment around the community engagement process.

So when the Parks Department started their community engagement process, there were vocal dissenters, like really vocal. And I believe they misdirected a lot of their anger at members of the coalition because we had always felt like you need politicians, specifically the city council member in whose catchment this work lands, so why would we make an enemy out of them. We can hold them accountable, but at some point we're going to have to work with them to bring whatever vision the community has for this to life. And so there have been verbal attacks toward members of the coalition, specifically myself, because I was one of the more visible people as part of the coalition. And they're coming from other community residents because they think we've sold out by having conversations with the Parks Department, or having conversations with local elected officials.

I see it as a completely avoidable thing, had there been transparency in the very beginning. Hindsight is 20/20 vision. But if I had to do it over again, I would say, at every step of the decision-making process, the descendant community should have been advised that this is what is happening, should have been given the reasons why certain decisions were being made, and allowed to weigh in, engage in discourse. This is what democracy is really about, right? It's engaging in discourse with the people that have elected you. So I saw it kind of as a failing, and

it doesn't bode well for a democratic process. But we still have time to, of course, correct. We can still begin to have those conversations now about what happens. And so a couple of weeks ago, Council Member Rita Joseph and the coalition have begun to start to work together on shifting the way this happens, so that there isn't any need for direct action. We can just work as a democracy should, in collaboration with regular folks, and I'm hoping that things continue in that vein.

Q: I know that this process of deciding the future of the burial ground is very iterative, I guess, with all the parties involved. And even with descendant leadership, there are the other practical kind of elements. Like you said, you can't get anything done if the whole list of people involved are enemies, right?

Sabio: Right.

Q: But what do you kind of think is the goal for what the coalition wants to see for the future of the space?

Sabio: Speaking for myself, we all kind of agree that community engagement is really where the work needs to happen. And by community engagement, it really is about helping folks understand the history of the space in order to make informed decisions. We don't want to speak for anyone. I know what I would like to see at the Burial Ground, which is part of the work that I'm teasing out with the Urban Design Forum Local Center. It's just the way of helping people to envision something beyond the typical monument. But I don't see that as being the be-all, end-

all. It really is about sparking these conversations, and treating Brooklynites as intelligent people, able to come together and make decisions about a very important space.

I also think a piece of it is taking the time to learn from other burial grounds that have been through this, because that hasn't really been done yet. We began the work in 2021, by having Dr. Michael Blakey come on, but there's a lot more to be unearthed there. We can look to Weeksville as an example for how this process can unfold. There's so many resources out there, but we just need to take the time. I don't think there's a rush to create anything just now. There's a lot of work that can be done before that. We've even talked about taking visits to other spaces that aren't your typical monuments or typical buildings in order to get inspiration and be inspired. Because I think that is what is going to help people remain, is this imagination, opening up your imagination about possibilities. And so that's where I see the work going.

And local electeds need to be a little patient as people wrap their heads around this history, and the space. I really don't see what the rush is. We can really take time. I think there's going to be a lot more money needed to actually execute something that is meaningful. And I've been trying to get Council Member Joseph to understand that Brooklyn is a global city, and has always been. Like we deserve a global quality monument that will draw people to it. Just your same old statue, that's not something to write home about. Something that is really imaginative, true to the legacy and the style of Brooklyn, but still that looks to the future, that's something that, if you're concerned about tourist dollars, and being able to bring people in to visit, do something beautiful, really, really beautiful, and community-led, that can be a benchmark for what happens in the future.

Q: Can you explain why having this property under Parks, in this kind of administrative area of the city, is a problem?

Sabio: I think the Parks Department, they haven't developed protocols specific to African burial grounds. The work that they've done at Sankofa Park is pretty much what they do at most places that are under Parks designation. They have a very standard set of operating procedures, and that's the problem for me. It's not, necessarily, that it's under Parks jurisdiction, it's that the protocols haven't been developed. I wouldn't have a problem if the statement was: "Burial grounds are being found all over the city. We understand that they're culturally sensitive sites. We're gonna take some time, and we're gonna develop a protocol, with community, for how we're going to react, and how we're going to build on sites that are African or Indigenous burial grounds. We're gonna take time to do that work, and we're gonna figure it out with community." Then, it being in the purview of Parks would not be a problem. But if you say that it's gonna be business as usual, and you're gonna do the same community engagement process that you've done all across the city, which is limited. If you say that you have a standard set of gates and fences that you use for all Parks properties, that's also not particularly imaginative. If you say that you're using the same suppliers for things that you've used all across the board, then how do we make sure that M/WBE [minority and women-owned business enterprise] takes precedence. And how do we really do that in a really robust way. Those things take time. And that's the problem with it being in the Parks Department, if that time and effort is not being devoted to shift the way things are done.

Q: Another kind of element that the city often engages in, is a kind of archaeological aspect. So can you talk about the coalition's thoughts about that potential—which did happen, I think, kind of as a consequence of disturbing the earth in the Manhattan site. But how does the coalition think about that?

Sabio: The archeological piece of things is definitely necessary, and we would love to see ground penetrating radars happen, and we're working on writing some grants to make that happen. So that then we can get a true sense of how extensive the burial ground actually is, how many remains are still in the ground, cause there's been considerable disturbance over the years. And even if there aren't very many remains left, we still see it as a sacred site, regardless, because remains were there. But the archaeology is gonna provide community education potential, much like they did at Weeksville. Young people, children getting involved, and understanding the history, and archaeology, and anthropology fields also adding to the historic record. Making sure that Brooklyn, as this site of enslavement gets added, and consistently spoken about as a space for enslavement, with the history attached to it. And then any items that are found, we want to be able to study those and get information about people, and how they would have lived in Brooklyn. We realize that's gonna take money to do that kind of work, and to make sure the community is engaged all along the path. So that's the real need for archaeology.

Q: What are your thoughts about some of the other kind of elements that often go along with preservation? For example, just landmarking some sites with cultural significance. These kind of formal processes that the city offers, and designations that the city offers for historic and cultural sites. What are your thoughts about engaging with that element of the city?

Sabio: I don't have a specific position on it, actually, mainly because we have just begun to scratch the surface of what that would entail in this particular space. So yeah, I don't really have an opinion on that until more research is done. One thing I can say is that, in working with the Lefferts House and also some of the gatherings that Weeksville has begun to do of other African American institutions, we'll be able to learn more about the pros and cons of landmarking, what the benefits are of it, and what some of the nitty gritty details are.

Q: Do you have any thoughts about how designating historic districts or historic properties in the city has had an impact on some of the efforts that you're working on through GrowHouse, with acquiring properties, and functioning as cooperatives, and things like that?

Sabio: I mean, in Bed-Stuy, where we lived for a while, we saw how landmarking increases property values. And that it can be a good thing if those property values are leveraged—if you want to call it that—or are deployed to the benefit of long-term residents. I think some of where things go awry, is when property values go up, and then the long-term residents who have been there for a while are challenged with affordability, because everything goes up at that point. It's not just about rent, it's about food prices going up, and cost of living going up. And so I think the structures that we're trying to put in place in terms of collective ownership, and making sure that people remain in place and not get displaced, could work hand in hand with historic districts landmarking. And to be fair, in doing history around the burial ground, and just around Brooklyn in general, what we're doing is not new. Black people have engaged in this kind of work. That's why Weeksville exists. We were able to understand that with land ownership and collective

stewardship, there came a level of power, politically and otherwise, and have always actively worked to make that happen. Things like single-room-occupancies, SROs, are now coming back in fashion, but those were affordability tactics that were used by low-income communities for a while. And so, if we can look to that past and understand some of the nuances in ways that we can modernize these techniques, and keep people in place, I don't have a problem with designating historic districts. I wouldn't have a problem with it.

Q: Where do you kind of see, or dream your work, in—maybe when your son is your age now? What would you like to see, for yourself, and for your larger community?

Sabio: I would love to see Brooklyn re-greened in some ways, right. Like just green roofs. And this is part of his dream as well, is making sure that some of the heat islands in Brooklyn are mitigated through green-roofing, ecologically-friendly building techniques, which is the wave of the future. I would love to see Black youth, then adults, being employed in those fields, and able to make a decent living retrofitting buildings, and doing all the things that need to be done for climate change. I see connective moves, like building in connection to each other, even in the midst of some very isolating times. Hopefully in the future those will no longer be. I also would love to see—I want to see Black folks who want to migrate. They should be able to. I don't think stopping migration is the thing. It really is about stopping displacement, and having the ability to move freely without discrimination, feeling included in society, feeling empowered. Those are the things that I would want to see in this future. Yeah, if he wants to raise his children—I have three children, you know, a daughter and two sons—if they want to be able to raise their children in Brooklyn, which is a choice that I made, that they'd be able to do so like comfortably. And not

live hand to mouth, and go through some of the things that we had to go through, and try to remain here.

Q: And there's a specific component to this question, and I think a really big component to this question, which is, I want to ask what can people do to support your work. So both in terms of the organizations that you work for, but also in terms of—like the big part is, what kind of frameworks, that are the dominant frameworks of thinking, do we need to shift for the work that you're doing to happen with more ease?

Sabio: Hmm. The dominant frameworks that need to shift in order for the work to happen with ease. I would say, the biggest thing for me would be kind of a real estate speculation at the moment. I think that there have been news reports of large companies buying up homes and holding them, which then removes them from the market, but then also drives affordability up for folks. And so, I think if there were some measures that were put in place that would reduce speculation, in favor of community ownership, that would be a big shift. And I want to add that NYCCLI, which is the New York City Community Land Initiative, we're a member of that coalition, and they have put forth a suite of bills, called the Community Land Act, that would help to make that happen. So things such as tenant opportunity to purchase—so when a property goes up on the market, the tenants have the first right of refusal to purchase their building. Stuff like that. COPA, which is Community Opportunity to Purchase, which would preference community land trusts and other nonprofits if a building gets put up for sale. Those are the kind of structural shifts that would allow for the work to happen with more ease.

And in addition to Community Opportunity to Purchase, I think some of these novel structures that we're working on should also be given preference, right, within limits. That way it's not only about one type of ownership, but there are multiple kinds of ownership that communities can engage in. Cause my only issue with the community land trust model is it doesn't really build generational wealth. And with African Americans being targeted by redlining and community disinvestment, it's really important that community wealth building be a part of any model that serves our community.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to add to our conversation today?

Sabio: I would say we're really looking to increase our Instagram followers, which sounds a little silly. I'm not really a big social media person, but in any case, I do understand that those metrics matter to folks that would want to sponsor or partner with us. And so we would really love for folks to follow us at GrowHouse BK, to keep abreast of all the things that we're up to in the community. Also when we finally get our 501c3 paperwork filled out, we would love for folks to begin to donate to the work that we're doing. Or, if not donate, get involved with the crowdfunding for real estate that we'll begin to do in the next few months, and become community owners, or investor owners, or something along those lines to help bring this vision to life. But yeah, that's it.

Q: Yeah, that's big, building momentum. For sure. Well, that's all that I have to ask you today. I just wanted to thank you for taking the time to do this, and I'm really eager to support your work and vision in whatever way that I can. So thank you so much.

Sabio: No. Thank you so much for being persistent, cause I know it was hard to— [laughs]

Q: You are not the hardest person to get in touch with! [laughs] I thank you for responding. I really do appreciate it. Well, have a wonderful day, and you'll hear from me in a month or two probably. So thank you so much Shanna. Have a great day.

Sabio: Wonderful. Thank you. You too. Bye-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]