

Artist's Statement – Gail S. Rebhan

A Cultural History of My Neighborhood is a public art project and exhibition that examines the cultural history of the second oldest neighborhood (Tenleytown) in Washington, D.C. This is not a nostalgic look back at simpler times. Rather, I tell an often untold story of daily life, highlighting changing societal values and desires. For example, government action to make Tenleytown a white area through land acquisition for a park and public schools is demonstrated. Other pieces illustrate shifting societal needs such as a retirement community replacing an orphanage. The changing moral values of American society, regarding integration of the public schools, are depicted in other pieces. Additionally, the various types of businesses primarily along the major commercial street (Wisconsin Avenue NW) are documented. This includes, for example, a decline in the number of shoe repair establishments and an increase in restaurants. Other issues are also examined.

I create the photo-collages by blending archival and contemporary photographs. Old newspaper articles, maps, and student handbooks are also included. Text is integrated into the image. Some of the text comes from oral histories, others are quotes from historic documents, and many are my own writing. Much research using primary and secondary sources goes into each piece. Using layers of various opacities, I convey a fluid sense of time and place. The impact of the past on the present is palpable.

Four large photo-collages (approximately 4 x 6 feet adhesive vinyl) are adhered to the windows of a vacant building in the neighborhood. Additionally, fifteen smaller versions (16 x 20 inch archival pigment prints) were exhibited this spring at the American University Museum, Washington, DC. This work functions well in a museum and a public art context. In the public art context, the work brings local history to residents and passersby in an accessible manner. In the museum context, viewers think about parallels with their own neighborhoods. Both groups confront an unsentimental look at past and present American society.

This project relates to my earlier autobiographical work which places mothering and aging in a social context. A common thread is an examination of the impact of cultural values on individuals and places. Another common theme is an interest in the depiction of time. I branched out from my family to my neighborhood in this current project.

This project was a collaboration with The American University Museum, Iona Senior Services, and Douglas Development Corporation. American University and Iona Senior Services are located in the neighborhood. I conducted oral histories with participants of Iona Senior Services. This raw material formed the basis of new photo-collages. Douglas Development Corporation provided window space in one of their vacant buildings. Receptions at American University Museum, Iona Senior Services, and a lecture/art walk at the neighborhood public library rounded out the project.

While the My Neighborhood project is specific to my locality, it is emblematic of changes to many areas in the city, region, and throughout the country.