

BROWNSVILLE HERITAGE HOUSE

BLACKSPACE

COMMUNITY VISIONING | DESIGN STRATEGY
BROOKLYN, NY

LOCATED IN BROWNSVILLE, BROOKLYN, THIS HOUSE MUSEUM ON THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE STONE AVENUE LIBRARY, HAS BEEN A COMMUNITY PILLAR FOR OVER 40 YEARS IN PRESERVING BLACK HISTORY, ARTS, AND EDUCATION.

First, the co-design team chose four BlackSpace Manifesto principles through a period of public events: be humble learners who practice deep listening, center lived experiences, protect & strengthen culture, foster personal & communal evolution.

Coupled with research of Black-led house museums, Brownsville history, and Black Memory Workers, Brownsville Heritage House (BHH) and BlackSpace created three main goals for the space:

- Co-create a design strategy
- Curate an exhibition
- Audit and reorganize the BHH archive and collection

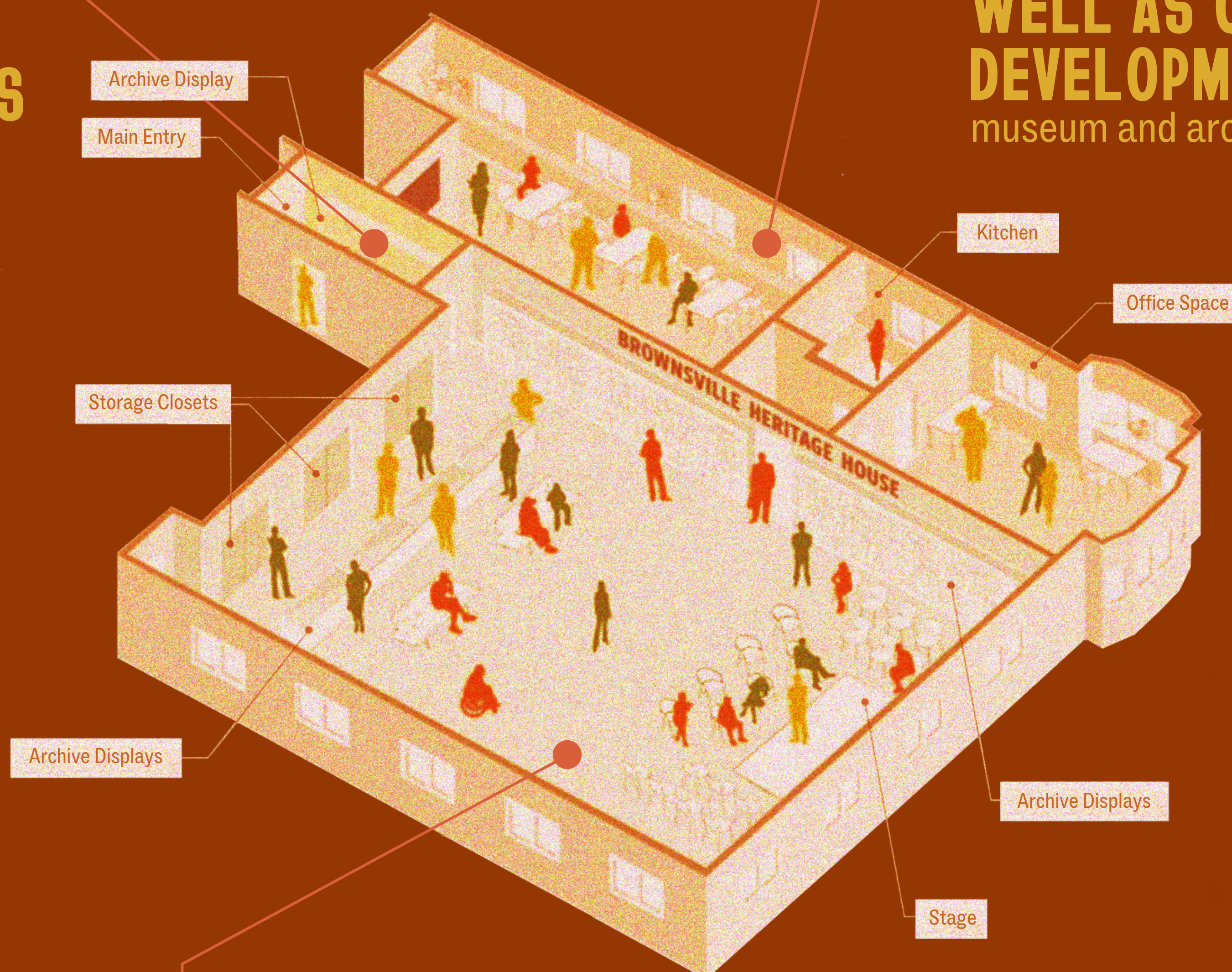
REDESIGN AND RECOMMENDATIONS
THE REIMAGINED SPACE, INFLUENCED BY COMMUNITY GROUPS FEEDBACK, IS A "PUBLIC LIVING ROOM" AIMED AT MAKING TREASURED ARTIFACTS MORE ACCESSIBLE TO BROWNSVILLE.



The strategy divides BHH into three main areas (Back of House, Front of House, and Main Exhibition Room) ready for reorganizing and renovation to fit the community's pragmatic and aesthetic demands:

THE FRONT OF HOUSE meets the main entrance and is designed to **VIBRANTLY GREET VISITORS** with showcases of archived material, art, and technologies.

THE BACK OF HOUSE was designed to be an intimate community space dedicated to artifact preservation and the organization of BHH's archival collection. It features private space for meetings and **GATHERINGS TO FOSTER COMMUNAL EVOLUTION AS WELL AS CREATIVE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT** for local youth through museum and archive education.



THE MAIN EXHIBITION ROOM is a shared, multi-purpose, and maximal exhibition space with a stage and ample built-in display storage that **ENSURES THE MATERIAL CULTURE IS ACCESSIBLE TO PUBLIC AUDIENCES WHO USE THE SPACE FOR ARTS AND CULTURAL EVENTS.**



THIS IS A BLACK SPACE.

PARTNERS

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BROWNSVILLE HERITAGE HOUSE

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DESIGN IMPLEMENTATION | EXHIBITION
BROOKLYN, NY

BROWNSVILLE HERITAGE HOUSE'S LONG HISTORY OF BLACK WOMEN STEWARDS WHO CURATED SPACES FOR EDUCATION, CULTURE AND ART IN BROWNSVILLE INSPIRED OUR CO-DESIGNED EXHIBIT CENTERED AROUND BUILDING A FAMILIAR AND COMFORTING SPACE FOR LEARNING IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

EXHIBITION GOALS

Curate an exhibition which:

- engages Black preservation methods,
- spotlights rich historical content,
- utilizes immersive and experiential design, and
- creates accessible links to the surrounding neighborhood heritage spaces.

THE LIVING ROOM

The Black Auntie Living Room wasn't just an aesthetic choice; it held historical significance. Rosetta Gaston, the founder and visionary of Brownsville Heritage House, started the Children's Cultural Corner right out of her own living room. Here, she nurtured young minds by teaching them about their culture and history, laying the foundation for what would become the BHH. Similar to other community-based museums founded as part of the Black Museums Movement, Mother Gaston's legacy collections illustrated the diasporic experience of Black life in Brownsville and beyond, encompassing African American, Caribbean, and African history and material culture.

THE VANITY

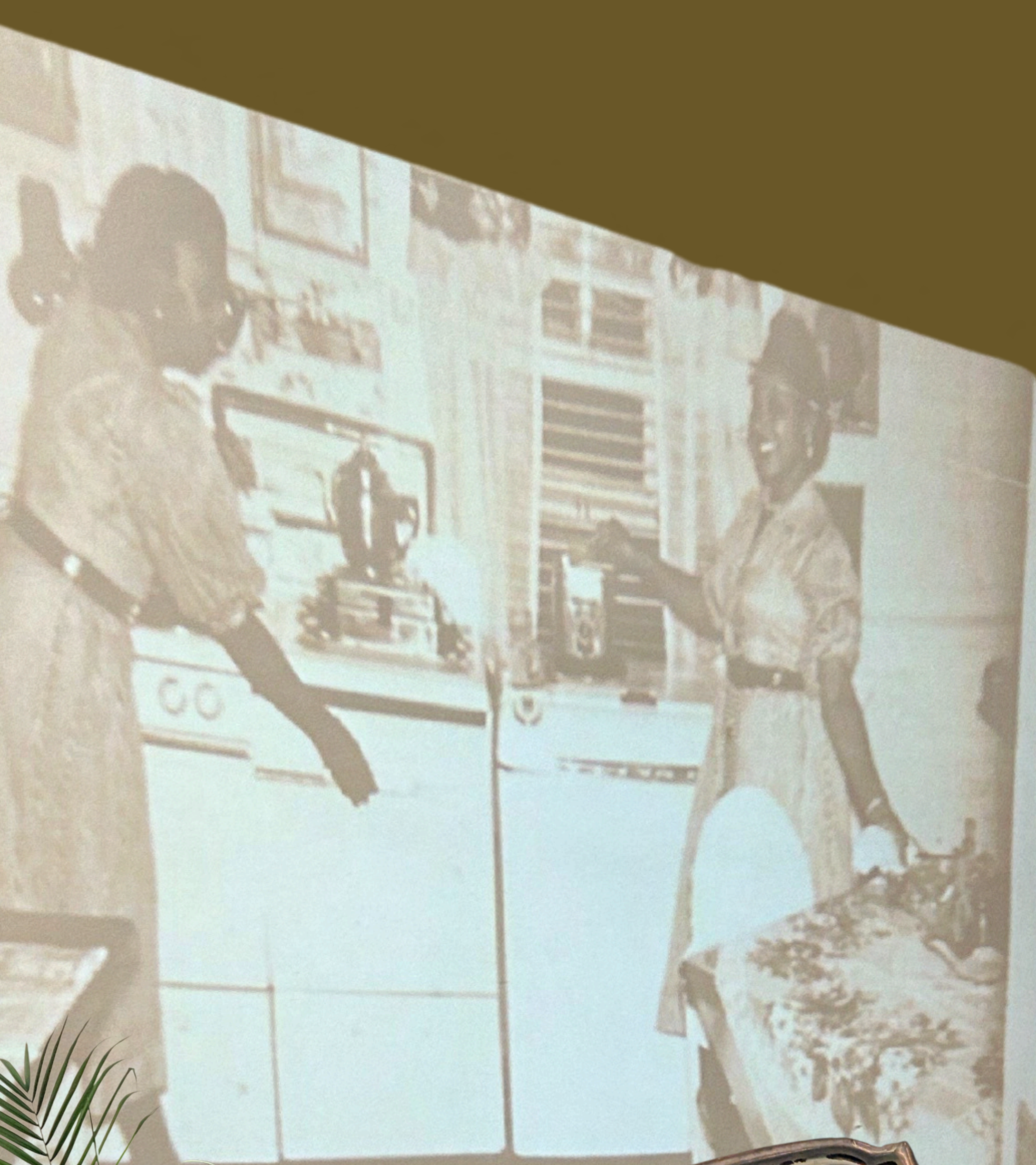
Patricia Deans, the former Executive Director, played a crucial role in illuminating the different waves of settlement and migration in Brownsville through the materials she collected. These collections embraced the experiences and cultures of indigenous and immigrant communities, both past and present. Dean's personal bold style and flair, along with her knack for finding unique textiles, costumes, folk art, and fine art, largely contributed to the interpretive and exhibition collection currently housed at BHH.

The vanity within the exhibit wasn't just a piece of furniture; it stood as a symbol of timeless elegance and self-care.

THIS LIVING ROOM SCENE REPRESENTED MORE THAN JUST A FAMILIAR SPACE IT EMBODIED SHARED EXPERIENCES AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE.

THE VANITY CHALLENGED SOCIETAL STANDARDS OF BEAUTY WHILE REFLECTING THE SPIRIT OF THE BLACK AUNTIE, WHO EXUDES GRACE IN HER OWN UNIQUE SENSE OF PERSONAL STYLE.

THROUGH A CURATED BLEND OF ARTIFACTS AND INTERACTIVE ELEMENTS, THE BLACK AUNTIE LIVING ROOM EXHIBITED THE MULTIFACETED EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN WITHIN THE BLACK HOME, DEMONSTRATING HOW THIS SPACE FOSTERS RESILIENCE, CREATIVITY, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING.



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BROWNSVILLE HERITAGE HOUSE

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DESIGN IMPLEMENTATION | ARCHIVE
BROOKLYN, NY

THE REORGANIZED ARCHIVE COLLECTION NOW SHOWCASES A SERIES OF ROTATING EXHIBITIONS HIGHLIGHTING BLACK ARTIFACT CULTURE, INCLUDING STORIES, OBJECTS, AND VARIOUS MEDIA SHARING BROWNSVILLE'S HISTORY TO ITS RESIDENTS AND SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES.

Archival Alchemy, led an audit by defining the collection scope and categorizing archival materials. In addition, the team created a Brownsville Heritage House (BHH) Collection Guide documenting BHH's collecting practices over the past 40+ years and providing a framework of best practices for the evolving collection of 4,000+ artifacts. The guide will serve as critical infrastructure for developing a volunteer community stewards program to help care and expand the archive.

In this process, a revised collecting mission emerged to reflect and guide BHH's future aspirations of becoming a community resource to uncover and challenge narratives about Brownsville.

The Collecting Mission articulates the purpose for collecting and intended uses of collection materials. Along with related policies and guidelines, the Collections Mission provides guidance to the staff, administration, community members, and potential donors toward the fulfillment of the mission through the acquisition and preservation of collection materials.

BHH'S COLLECTIONS ENCOURAGE VISITORS TO IMMERSE AND DEEPLY CONSIDER THEIR ACTIVE ROLES AND RELATIONSHIP TO THIS HISTORY.

ENHANCED VOLUNTEER SKILLS

The contracted project manager then worked collaboratively with movers, volunteers, and staff to carry materials back to the reading room, ensuring proper organization and accessibility for public use.

PREPARATION FOR READING ROOM RENOVATION

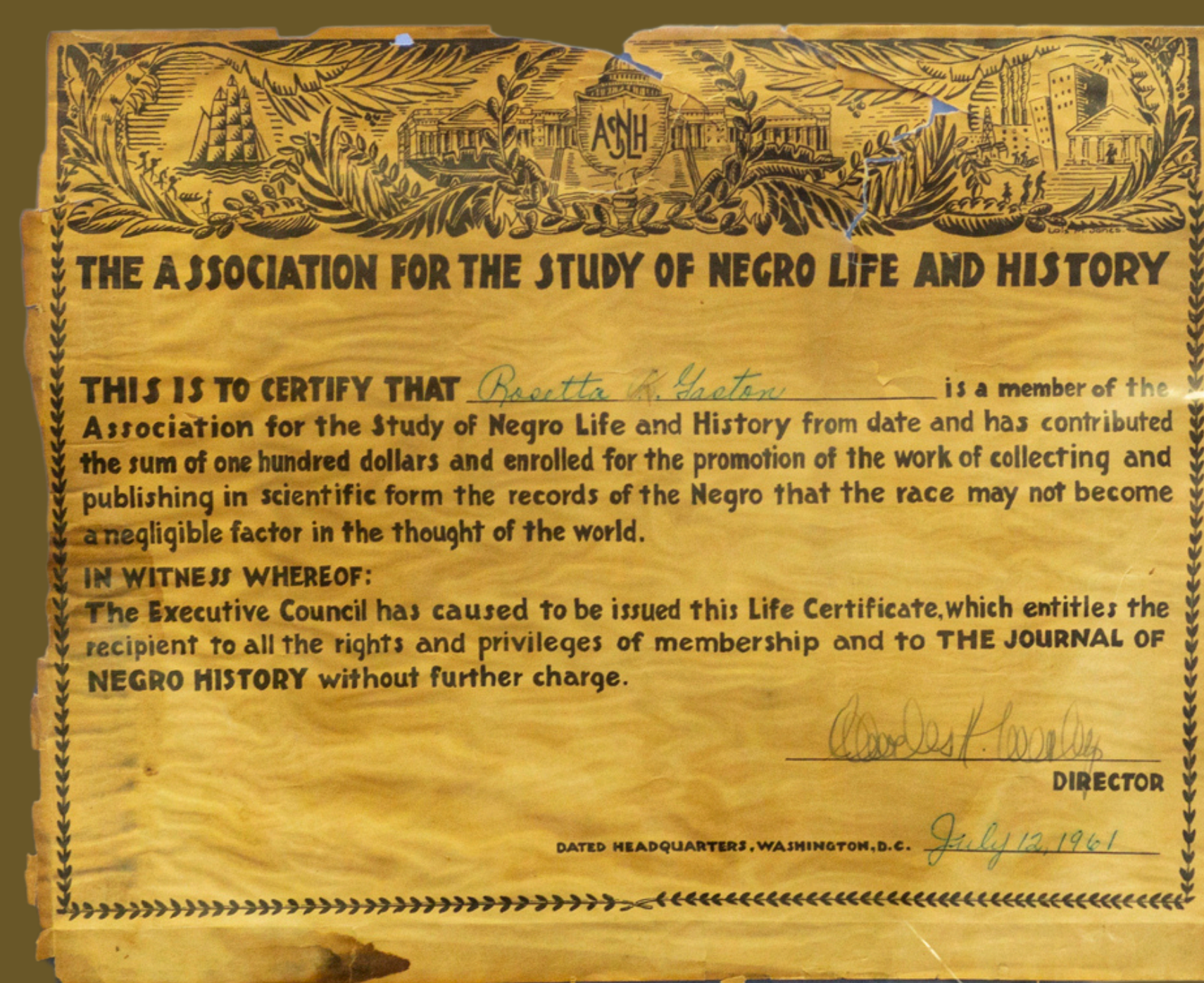
Two archivists were hired to provide training for staff and improve the archival skills of BHH volunteers, ensuring proper handling and care of the collection.

REINTEGRATION AND PUBLIC ACCESS

BHH organized sorting, packing, and moving days to prepare for the reading room renovation. This involved sorting materials, packing them for safekeeping during construction, and moving them to the temporary storage unit.

COMMUNITY SORTING DAYS

BHH hosted five community sorting days, engaging local residents in the process of organizing, cataloguing, and preserving 1,371 historical materials.



BHH CONTINUES TO FORMALIZE THEIR ARCHIVAL PROCESS AND EXPAND THEIR COLLECTION PRESERVING AND SHOWCASING BROWNSVILLE'S RICH HISTORY.



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BROWNSVILLE HERITAGE HOUSE

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DESIGN IMPLEMENTATION | READING ROOM
BROOKLYN, NY

BLACKSPACE AND BROWNSVILLE HERITAGE HOUSE IMPLEMENTED THE DESIGN STRATEGY TO SUPPORT BHH'S EFFORTS TO PROVIDE BROWNSVILLE WITH A PUBLIC "LIVING ROOM" FOSTERED BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND GROUPS.

An audit of Brownsville Heritage House (BHH) collections provided valuable insights into the archive's storage needs. However, it was the community's visions shared at 13 events that truly shaped the overall feel of the space.

BOLT Architecture, a Brooklyn-based firm, played a key role in bridging the gap. They expertly synthesized BHH's spatial and programmatic requirements with the community's aspirations to inform the back-of-house design.

Through a collaborative design process with BOLT Architecture, we reimagined the reading room. The concept design aimed to create a welcoming space where visitors could delve into the BHH and Brownsville archives.

To translate these ideas into reality, BlackSpace Project Partner Alicia Ajayi created detailed architectural drawings, paving the way for the renovation.

KEY FEATURES

- **Increased Storage Capacity:** Custom wood shelving was installed above existing bookshelves, maximizing storage capacity in the newly created rooms.
- **Flexible Spaces:** The design prioritized flexibility, allowing for both individual study and small group gatherings.

BRINGING THE VISION TO LIFE

With the design finalized, we partnered with Forecast Design to bring the vision to life. Their skilled team meticulously installed the custom wood shelving units, ensuring optimal storage space. Additionally, they carefully refurbished any existing shelving units that needed rehabilitation, preserving the space's character.

Beyond practical improvements, we incorporated existing furniture and props to the reading room - borrowing elements of the "Black Auntie Exhibit" we hosted. Furthermore, to enhance the overall ambiance and control direct sunlight, we incorporated beautiful stained glass decals. These decorative elements not only add a touch of warmth but also help regulate temperature within the archive.

THE READING ROOM IS OPEN TO PUBLIC VISITORS AND SERVES AS A DYNAMIC TRIBUTE TO THE PAST, A CELEBRATION OF THE PRESENT, AND A SPACE FOR THE PUBLIC TO CONTINUE TO BUILD BROWNSVILLE'S LEGACY.



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