

Constructing a Community

Length:	30 minutes
School:	Intermediate School 230
Location:	Jackson Heights, Queens, N.Y.
Grade:	8
Teachers:	Maria Bonilla, Visual Art Gail Altan, Social Studies
Description:	Students are immersed in the architecture of their neighborhood.

About This Program

Visual art teacher Maria Bonilla and social studies teacher Gail Altan have strong feelings for the community where they grew up, teach, and continue to live. That neighborhood is Jackson Heights, Queens, a landmark historic district. With an eighth-grade class that they have in common—a class that requires extra help with math and reading—the teachers have decided to focus on the history and architecture of their neighborhood.

Originally built as an all-white planned community in the 1920s, Jackson Heights is now a vibrant, ethnically diverse neighborhood. The eighth-grade class reflects that diversity, and the teachers' goal is to help the students see themselves as citizens of their own unique community.

In social studies, the students discuss why buildings are designated as landmarks, and in visual art they learn architecture terms that apply to Jackson Heights. They also create and critique detailed paper collages of buildings in the neighborhood. After these classes, we see Maria and Gail meeting to review where they are heading with the project.

Three months later, we see how the students have progressed in both subjects. In social studies, they present posters showing their research about aspects of the neighborhood—part of a required exit project for eighth-graders. In visual art, they work enthusiastically on their scale models of neighborhood buildings. Then, with both teachers, the class goes on a walking tour of Jackson Heights, stopping to compare the models with the actual buildings and to discuss other aspects of the community.

Arts and Non-Arts Standards Addressed in This Program

Standards listed refer to the McREL Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks, a synthesis of national standards in each of the disciplines, found at www.mcrel.org.

Visual Arts

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Geography

Standard 6: Understands that culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions

Viewing Suggestions

Who Should Watch This Program

Teachers—“Constructing a Community” will be of interest to any middle school teachers who want their students to explore the architecture and landmarks of the community in which they live.

Administrators and professional development providers—This program can be useful in helping teachers engage in collaborative, interdisciplinary units of study that connect students with their community.

Before You Watch

Respond to the following questions.

- What is community? What historical, geographical, economic, cultural, artistic, civic, or regional influences have shaped the community in which your school sits?
- How do you make the concept of community tangible or visible to students?
- How do the arts influence community? How does community life affect the arts?

Watch the Program

As you watch, note the roles that collage-making and model-making play in students’ study of local architecture. How do students acquire architectural vocabulary? Note the kinds of issues and concepts students encounter, such as landmark building status and civic planning. Write down what you find interesting, surprising, or especially important about the teaching and learning you see in this unit.

Reflect on the Program

- What areas of study—arts and non-arts—were connected in students’ work on local architecture?
- What kinds of preparation do you think preceded the lessons seen in the program, and helped make these activities successful for students?
- What knowledge do these teachers have about their local community, and how does this knowledge help them plan and conduct the unit?
- Which components of the study—social studies or visual art—would be most challenging for you and your colleagues to incorporate into an integrated unit? Why?
- What evidence, if any, did you see of the ways students benefited from this unit of study?

Additional Resources

Consult some of these resources for more information.

Books

Dietsch, Deborah K. *Architecture for Dummies*. New York: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2002. ISBN: 0764553968

Green, Betsy. *Discovering the History of Your House And Your Neighborhood*. Santa Monica, Calif.: Santa Monica Press, 2002. ISBN: 1891661248

Hellman, Louis. *Architecture for Beginners*. New York: Writers & Readers, 1988. ASIN: 0863160417

Light, Sally, & Eberle, Margaret. *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the History of Your House*. Spencertown, N.Y.: Golden Hill Press, 1989. ISBN: 0961487615

Plunz, Richard. *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. ISBN: 0231062974

Web Sites

National Register of Historic Places: A national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect our historic and archaeological resources
<http://www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/welcome.html>

National Trust for Historic Preservation: A privately funded, non-profit organization that provides leadership, education, and advocacy to save America's diverse historic places and revitalize our communities
<http://www.nationaltrust.org/>

Lower East Side Tenement Museum: Museum Web site containing virtual tours, primary documents, and resources for teachers
<http://www.tenement.org/>

Jackson Heights: A Garden in the City: Description and photos of Jackson Heights in Queens, New York City, assembled by the Jackson Heights Beautification Group
<http://www.preserve.org/jhbg/>

Notes
