Architecture Prof. Kathy Dixon Discusses Historic Home of Madam C.J. Walker

UDC Assistant Professor of Architecture and Community Planning, Kathy Dixon, recently spoke with PreservationNation Blog from the National Trust for Historical Preservation about the historic residence of Madam C.J. Walker. Born in Louisiana in 1867, Walker was a pioneer known for her hair care and cosmetics products developed especially for African American women, training 23,000 employees in the process. She is America's first self-made female millionaire, according to the Guinness Book of Records.

Located in Irvington, New York, Villa Lewaro, "embodies the optimism and perseverance of the American entrepreneurial spirit," according to PreservationNation. The home was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1976 for its architectural significance. Kathy Dixon, a licensed architect and also the president of the National Organization of Minority Architects, discusses Villa Lewaro with PreservationNation:

PN: Madam Walker said that “Villa Lewaro was not merely her home, but a Negro institution that only Negro money bought.” She had built the house, she said, to “convince members of [my] race of the wealth of business possibilities within the race, to point to young Negroes what a lone woman accomplished and to inspire them to do big things.” What does this quote -- and her vision -- mean to you in a modern context? What about Madam Walker’s original intent still stands, and what perhaps has changed?

KD: Madam Walker’s quote about building a home for the Negro culture is a profound statement which is still relevant today. It reflects what must have been a strong conscious effort on her part to make a positive impact in the lives of “Negros” around the country.

Her determination to start and maintain a successful business as well as the vision to build a structure that would be used to celebrate the accomplishments of an entire culture, not just her own accomplishments, is evidence of her leadership qualities. Her efforts are worthy of imitation, and she is a wonderful role model even for today’s generation.

Unfortunately our society still struggles with prejudice and lack of tolerance, which I believe inhibits many from reaching their full potential. Sadly, not much has changed in the world since Madam Walker left us. The need to inspire young African-American men and women to succeed in business and education still exists and is perhaps even more pertinent.

To read the rest of the interview, visit PreservationNation Blog.