



Jennie Shanker and Lenny Correa work on *Norris Homes Historical Marker* (in-progress) © 2015 Jennie Shanker. 10th and Norris Streets. Photo by Steve Weinik courtesy of Mural Arts Philadelphia.

Artist Jennie Shanker shares what she's learned working with residents of Norris Homes for three years, documenting their lives and telling their stories, past and present.

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## Norris Homes Philly: Documenting a Neighborhood During Profound Change.

In 2014, Philadelphia-based artist Jennie Shanker, began working with the residents of Norris Homes in North Philadelphia on a mural and accompanying website to commemorate the changing landscape of the community as its homes were scheduled to be demolished. The Norris Homes were built by the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA) in 1952. By 2020 they will be demolished and replaced by new mixed income housing as part of PHA's North Central Philadelphia Transformational Plan and Choice Neighborhoods Initiative.

Current Norris residents will need to move away, and some may move back once new units are built. Some residents are choosing to leave the area, but even those who choose to return will find themselves in a new community.

The transition will address important community needs, but nonetheless will be disruptive to the bonds of community—a source of power and agency for residents that thrive within Norris Homes' current configuration. It is a difficult prospect for residents whose experiences and memories are embedded in the neighborhood.

## Introduction

# Images of a Neighborhood.



Girls' group mapping the neighborhood and photographing the process, Norris After School with Rebecca Fabiano/Choice programming. Photo by Jennie Shanker. Dendy Recreation Center, 10th and Jefferson Streets.

**“This change at Norris represents a significant social re-engineering of a section of Philadelphia, and it marks the beginning of the end of public housing projects that are primarily low-income communities. It is part of the history of this city, and of public housing in this country.”**

ARTIST JENNIE SHANKER

As an adjunct faculty member at neighboring Temple University, Jennie often thought about how an artist could play a role in working with the community during this transition. Her work with the Norris community was initiated when she was invited to participate in *Open Source*, a city-wide public art exhibition organized by Mural Arts Philadelphia. For *Open Source*, 13 artists were offered a platform (Mural Arts' community-based practice and existing relationships) and invited to innovate through a series of projects exploring Philly's diverse urban identity. Jennie's project for *Open Source* had two components, the website, [www.NorrisHomesPhilly.com](http://www.NorrisHomesPhilly.com), and a series of murals painted with assistant Lenny Correa at 10th and Norris Streets, consisting of images of typical Norris homes' facades painted on a series of partly-buried concrete retaining walls across from the homes. The finished murals represent an image of the neighborhood and an historical marker pointing passersby to the website and its archival trove of the stories, people, images and histories of Norris Homes. Initially, photographs on the site were taken by the artist and her assistants, former student Andrew Jimenez, and Norris resident Cinovia Williams. The number of contributors expanded as the project progressed.

The website is a living portrait of a Philadelphia community that has existed for almost 70 years. After the success of the *Open Source* project, Jennie and Mural Arts received a grant from Philadelphia Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to further engage Norris residents in a yearlong process of reflection, learning, documentation and community building culminating in the publication of a neighborhood Yearbook to capture the history and identity of Norris Homes at this critical juncture. As important as creating a physical Yearbook, the opportunity for residents to collaborate more fully on its production became central to this next phase of work.

## Artist's Changing Role

Jennie initially proposed to work with residents through a series of photography, storytelling and oral history workshops.

But she soon realized that to be a true collaborator with residents, open to their ideas and preferred ways of working, a different format for exchange was needed. Over the course of the project, her role became more of an artist-in-resident, deeply embedded within the community and able to respond to needs as they arose. Her role shifted greatly, from that of teacher to more of an assistant to residents who have their own photo and video projects.

Collaborating with assistants Cinovia Williams and Kelly Seabron—both Norris residents—as well as additional members of the community, Jennie:

**Created a Norris Homes Yearbook featuring old and new photos of the neighborhood and its residents.**

Yearbooks were distributed to everyone who wanted one, and extra copies were given to community leaders for further distribution.

**Provided free photo services.**

To document public (cookouts, reunions, community meetings, etc.) and private (memorials, birthday parties, baby showers) events. She would provide free prints as well as digital files of the images taken upon request.

**Mentored two, paid community members as project photographers. They worked as a team to design the layout of the Yearbook online.**

**Taught and encouraged neighborhood kids to use her DSLR and point and shoot cameras.**

She printed and distributed their photos and included them in the project's books and website.

**Retouched, reprinted and archived old photographs brought to her by residents.**



Boys' group building a camera dolly, Norris After School with Rebecca Fabiano/Choice programming. Photo by Alia Hatch. Norris Community Center, 11th and Berks Streets.

**Painted boarded up windows and doors to alleviate sudden blight brought on by evictions.**

**Served as camera crew, video editor and advisor for residents who wanted to make their own films.**

**Served as an artistic "generalist."**

As residents began to recognize her value as an artist, they began seeking her skills for diverse projects.

**Worked directly with kids at the Norris Community Summer Camp and After-School programs.**

**Encouraged and supported residents interested in documenting aspects of their lives or their community.**

**Created and maintained the online archive.**

The project and the documentation it gathered and produced is available for viewing through the website [www.NorrisHomesPhilly.com](http://www.NorrisHomesPhilly.com).

**Served as a liaison.**

Among many partners working at Norris, including Temple University, Mural Arts, the Norris Resident Council, project funders and others.

**Continues to provide regular tours of the project to a range of stakeholders, and is seeking opportunities to share this work with the broader public.**

When this project is completed in 2020, Jennie plans to approach city libraries, museums and archives to house copies of the Yearbook and other materials from Norris Homes.

## Impact

# Ultimately, the project:

Gained the support of community leaders young and old.

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Increased the level of documentation by residents of life at Norris Homes.

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Created a platform where residents were able to become documentarians.

Skill acquisition varied, but a culture of documentation developed, and high levels of participation, both in front of and behind the camera, indicated that residents gained agency in representing their community.

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Effectively engaged neighborhood children.

Kids learned to use and care for sophisticated camera equipment and came to enjoy the expressive and documentary potential of photography.

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Formed new relationships among project partners and strengthened relationships between Norris Homes, Temple University and Mural Arts.

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Will become a key part of ongoing documentation of the community that will continue past the life of the grant.

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Norris Summer Camp field trip on The Spirit of Philadelphia. Photo by Jennie Shanker.

“The first time I gave my camera away, it was to a kid who I felt a little nervous giving it to. So when I gave it to him, I showed him how to use it, and told him he could take five shots. He was calm and focused when the camera was in his hands. I thought I’d have to haggle with him to get it back, but he handed it over after he’d taken his five pictures. I looked at the pics with him, and I let him know they were really good shots. I printed them and gave him copies the next time I saw him, and he asked for a few more copies to give to members of his family.”

ARTIST JENNIE SHANKER

## Lessons Learned

**It takes a long time to build relationships, trust and an understanding of the work among members of the community. Be patient and persistent.**

Early on, residents were skeptical about the project's goals and wary of Jenny as an outsider. When she first addressed them at a community meeting, questions from the crowd included: "Stories? What stories?", "What, you want to hear about shootings?" and "What do you get out of it?". But once there was trust and the purpose of the work was understood, it became a component of their environment that residents engaged with freely. As Jennie now says, "We can do things now that we couldn't have done a year ago."

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**Process and products should be transparent, based in respect, and shared.**

Initially, people were suspicious of the camera, so Jennie came up with certain rules. "I told people, 'I will not use a picture of you without your permission, and I will not keep a shot that you don't like.' After being photographed, anyone in a picture could look at it on the camera. Any images they didn't like were erased in front of them. In the beginning, even if someone was in the background at a distance, I would let them know I'd taken a picture they were in. If they wanted it to be erased, it was erased. I also started to make prints, and I'd carry them around to give out when I crossed paths with someone again." Having something to exchange — photos and photography services — conveyed that the intent of the project was about an appreciation for life at Norris, and that they had control over the images that would be used.

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**Be flexible and follow the leads from within the community.**

Jennie realized early on that the weekly workshops she had organized were not as successful as she had hoped. There was very low turnout. Over time it became clear that people wanted more informal, social experiences rather than structured learning workshops. It wasn't that they were not interested in photos, but as she puts it, "People were eager to take advantage of photographic services, even if they weren't ready to learn photography themselves."



Nakia Short and Jennie filming anti-gun violence video with kids from the Norris After School Program. Photo by Samire Locks. Norris Homes 11th Street Playground.

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**Informal interactions can lead to larger collaborations.**

For example, it was an informal conversation with former resident Dewey Denby at a cookout that led to the most recent collaborative community video. Dewey had always wanted to make a video showing people's photos from Norris Homes in the 1950's, narrated by residents. Jennie told him, "We should do it!" Dewey organized a group of community elders to talk about the project with Jennie, and they've recently started shooting interviews.

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**Vary locations and activities.**

As Jennie observed, "By working in various locations and in different capacities within the community (on the streets, with kids in summer camp and after-school programs, showing up at community meetings, and by photographing public and private events), I was able to develop relationships with a broad range of people connected to Norris — current residents, former residents, PHA employees, Community Center program participants, as well as people who would have never entered the building."

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**Recognize a neighborhood's unique assets, and collaborate.**

This project benefited greatly by building on assets that already existed within the Norris Homes community — the neighborhood's proximity to Temple University and Jennie's role as an adjunct faculty member there; early support from two dynamic community leaders; an active Resident Council at Norris Homes; and existing after-school and summer programs.

## Insight for Artists

# Jennie's Words:

### Don't just work with a community through its organizational structure.

Be on the street and involved in residents' personal and family events.

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### Make things to give away.

Have something to give to people that they want, need or might just like.

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### Everything done for a resident should be for free.

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### Long-term work is important.

Funding is not always structured in a way that supports long-term work in a community, but this level of commitment is critical to making a difference.

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### Collaborate with everyone.

Use your skills to collaborate with people who are not artists, but who have important connections to place and strong visions for creative work they want to fulfill.

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### Kids need things to be real and tangible.

They need to do and make real things using real tools. The stakes for what they do need to be real. They want show that they can be trusted.

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### Extensive support is needed for a project like this.

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Don't get involved if you can't make this work a significant part of your waking hours and time on earth.



Jennie and *Open Source* assistants Cinovia Williams and Andrew Jimenez at Norris Holiday party. Photo by Sierra Eleby-Francis. Norris Community Center.

### Understand your place and presence as an outsider.

You can't change it, and that there's value in maintaining it.

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### Prepare to tap into all you have to offer.

This includes your background, your skills, your networks and resources.

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### You should be the only person who works as a "volunteer."

Pay or barter with the people who work with you.

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### Fear no one, connect with everyone, but don't tempt danger.

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### To gain trust, make sure everything you do that makes people nervous is in their control.

Develop rules for your practice to address their concerns, and stick to them.

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### Give away what you make to the people it belongs to.

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### People and participants will have no idea of what you have in mind.

Show them samples early and often. Solicit critical feedback.



Louis, Norris After School Program. Photo by Jennie Shanker. Dendy Recreation Center, 10th and Jefferson Streets.



Norris Homes Historical Marker © 2015 Jennie Shanker. 10th and Norris Streets. Photo by Steve Weinik courtesy of Mural Arts Philadelphia



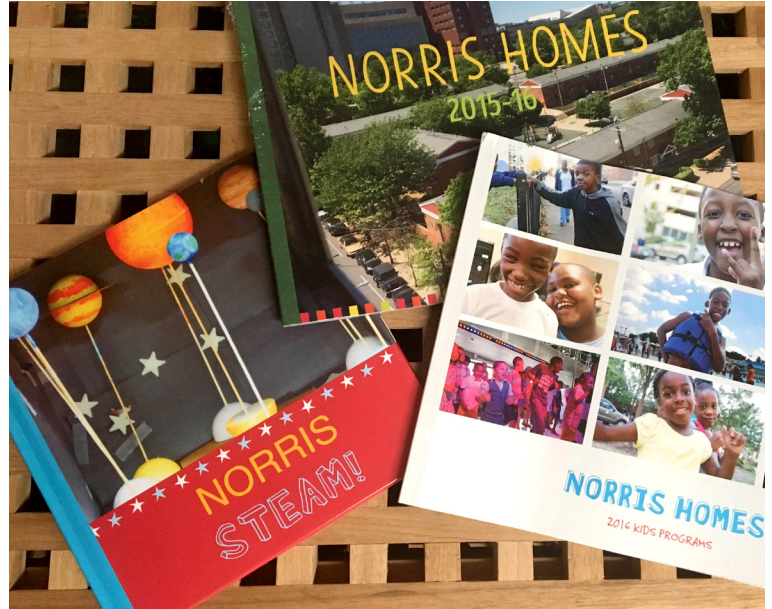
Resident Council President Donna Richardson serving dinner at the Norris Thanksgiving meal 2015. Photo by Jennie Shanker. Norris Community Center.



Jamal taking a picture of Louis who's taking his picture, Norris After School Program. Photo by Louis. Norris Community Center.



Joanne Simmonds, aka Ms. Jo, playing with Asi and Duane on her stoop. Photo by Andrew Jimenez. 1900 block of N. Warnock Street.



The After School STEAM program book, the Norris Homes Yearbook, and the Norris Homes Summer Camp book. Photo by Jennie Shanker.



Door and windows repainted over plywood. Photo by Jennie Shanker. 1929 N. Warnock Street.



Samire filming anti-gun violence video with kids from the Norris After School Program. Photo by Jennie Shanker. Norris Homes 11th Street Playground.

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