



**Kansas 1972 Podcast**  
**Episode 9 – URBAN RENEWAL**

**SERIES INTRO**

**Tracy:**

This series was made possible by the Friends of Humanities Kansas.

**Kara Heitz:** Welcome to *Kansas 1972*. A lot happened during that pivotal year, including the founding of Humanities Kansas. In celebration of our 50th anniversary, we'll be telling stories from that era of Kansas history. So tune in, chill out, and get the lowdown on 1972.

**EPISODE INTRODUCTION**

***The City Time of Decision, 1967***

This is the rhythm of a city. Any big city anywhere. In this case, it is an American city. Yet its problems and potentials are shared by cities all over the world. Today, American cities are facing a crisis. They are running a high fever of unplanned growth. They are overcrowded and overwhelmed. For the first time, Americans are beginning to seriously examine how their cities got that way.

**Kara Heitz:**

The story of the 20th century in the United States is partly a story of urbanization. While a little under 40% of Americans lived in cities in 1900, by 1950 that number had risen to 64%. In 1970, almost 74% of the U.S. population were city dwellers. Today, about 83% of us live in urban areas.

And with the growth of urban spaces, came a host of both opportunities and problems. Cities could be engines of economic development and cultural engagement, but unchecked expansion could also create “blighted” areas where residents lacked access to adequate housing, public services, and functioning infrastructure. In decades after World War II, to address some of these issues, many cities engaged in policies and practices that came to be known as “urban renewal.”

The intended purpose of urban renewal is to help improve neighborhoods seen as impoverished or in decline. This typically involves the demolition of existing buildings in order to construct new ones, as well as the improvement of infrastructure like roads and public spaces.

While these projects are meant to revitalize neighborhoods, urban renewal also has been severely criticized. Long-standing residents are displaced as older buildings are torn down for new construction and land is often taken via eminent domain for infrastructure projects. And the new businesses and residents who move into a community can fundamentally alter the character and culture of an existing neighborhood. And many neighborhoods targeted for urban renewal in the 1950s-1970s were communities of color.

In Kansas, almost every single large and medium sized city engaged in some kind of urban renewal project in the second half of the 20th century. And even some small towns jumped on the urban renewal bandwagon.

For example, in 1972 alone, if you search for “urban renewal” in Kansas newspapers on Newspapers.com, you get over 1700 hits. (Clearly, we can’t do stories on all of these!) But some towns in Kansas with significant urban renewal programs in 1972 include: Salina, Garden City, Manhattan, Parsons, Olathe, Atchinson, Coffeyville, and Neodesha. And most of these urban renewal programs also were controversial at the time.

Today, we’ll be telling the story of urban renewal in Kansas in the early 1970s with a focus on one particular urban space – the city of Wichita.

We’ll hear about how plans to revitalize downtown Wichita threatened an important part of local African American history.

**Denise Sherman:**

“But the big movement became in the 70s with urban renewal. And many of this, many of those structures in this community were torn down”

**Kara Heitz:**

And how one woman successfully fought back to save an important community landmark.

**Denise Sherman:**

“There was a young lady along with her family and other members of the church who said no.”

**Kara Heitz:**

We’ll also learn about how highway building in Wichita impacted a Northeast black neighborhood.

**Robert Weems:**

“We saw a lot of Black businesses and residences that were displaced as a result of the building of I-135.”

**Kara Heitz:**

And how a contemporary mural project connects and celebrates two Wichita communities driven apart by urban renewal.

**Armando Minjarez:**

"It became a visual metaphor or right for that division that we have between black and brown people and an opportunity to start have, you know, to address, to have that conversation."

**SEGMENT 1 - The Kansas African American Museum**

***This is Wichita Final Show 12-4-1941.mp3***

Hello world. This is Wichita.

The story of Wichita, its people, its progress, the story of your city and mine. This is Wichita.

**Kara Heitz:**

The city of Wichita is home to The Kansas African American Museum, personally one of my favorite museums in the state, whose mission is to "make the Kansas African American experience resonant with EVERY Kansan."

**Denise Sherman:**

...when we speak about our mission, we really have in mind that African American history is American history, and you cannot separate the two and get a complete picture or a better understanding.

But often we only know one side of history. And so we strive every day our staff, our curator, our volunteers, our board and even friends of the museum, the community to share with others the rest of the story, if you will, the parts that they may not be familiar with or maybe heard a little bit, but not the expanded version.

**Kara Heitz:**

That's Denise Sherman, Executive Director of the Kansas African American Museum. The museum has been fulfilling its mission for a quarter of a century now. But establishing the museum was no easy task. The building its currently located in was almost demolished in the 1970s, and the journey to opening a museum in this historic space was a long one.

The museum is currently located in the historic Calvary Baptist Church building downtown. The original Calvary Baptist congregation was established in 1878, to serve the spiritual needs of Wichita's black community. African Americans began leaving the South after the Civil War, in search of new opportunities. Those that came to Kansas became known as Exodusters.

As the African American population in Wichita continued to grow in the early 20th century, the Calvary Baptist congregation built a permanent church building in 1913 at

the corner of Water and Elm. But after just a few years, that building was deemed a fire hazard.

**Denise Sherman:**

The congregation built that early church with their hard sweat, earned money and built it nights and weekends over a period of time, and that was really pretty devastating for them. They did comply. They tore down the church and rebuilt this one. And so, in 1917, the second church was the one we are housed in today...

***The Wichita Eagle, Nov. 11, 1917***

“The laying of the corner stone of the new Calvary Baptist church which is being erected at the corner of Elm and Water Streets, will take place this afternoon at 3:45. A splendid program will be rendered at 2:30 at the courthouse, where the congregation is now holding its services. The Masonic Lodge, Arkansas Valley, No. 21, will conduct the ceremony.”

**Kara Heitz:**

The exterior of this two-story Neo-Classical building is mainly brick, with some stone used in trim work and on the foundation. The main facade is five bays wide, with a large portico over the central three bays, supported by four Doric columns. Above the portico are the words in relief “Calvary Baptist Church.”

Like the 1911 structure, church members raised the money themselves for this new structure, which totaled around \$60,000. That’s over \$1.4 million today! And almost all the individuals employed in the construction of the building, including the architect, were African American.

From the late 1860s until midcentury, the downtown neighborhood centered around Water Street was the hub of black life in Wichita. (Remember this is the era of segregation and African Americans were not welcomed in most white-owned establishments.) Businesses owned by and catering to African Americans, such as restaurants, doctors, attorneys, hairdressers, tailors, and clothes cleaners, thrived in downtown Wichita. And Calvary Baptist Church was one of the centers this community.

However, as the 20th century moves on, the demographics of Wichita began to shift. In the years after World War I, African Americans had already begun to move farther north in the city. Space limitations in the downtown area, as well as work opportunities in the North End, drew people to neighborhoods such as McAdams.

Also, during and after World War II, more African Americans migrated to Wichita, as the aviation and defense industries provided work opportunities. So by midcentury, the majority of African Americans in Wichita resided in communities North of downtown. But the downtown Calvary Baptist Church continued to be an anchor for the Black community.

**Denise Sherman:**

...the congregation of Calvary Baptist Church was very instrumental in providing a base of hope and encouragement and livelihood for African Americans.

**Kara Heitz:**

In the late 1950s, the construction of a new county courthouse led to the removal of some residences and commercial buildings that were once part of the historic downtown black community. But this was only the beginning.

***The City Time of Decision, 1967***

The first battle against urban blight was fought with the bulldozer.

**Denise Sherman:**

the big movement became in the 70s with urban renewal. And many of this, many of those structures in this community were torn down. Quite heartbreaking if you really want to know. I'm sure it is not much different than any other city that experienced some of the same activities and some of the same fate, if you will.

**Kara Heitz:**

In 1972, following their church members, Calvary Baptist built a new building farther North. The Wichita Urban Renewal Agency purchased the downtown church building, along with others in the neighborhood. Plans were being made to turn the space into a parking lot or perhaps be a part of a planned downtown highway loop (which actually never came to fruition).

Today the Kansas African American Museum is located in this building. So how was the historic Calvary Baptist Church saved?

Denise Sherman tells the story.

**Denise Sherman:**

But when it came to tearing down this church, there was a young lady along with her family and other members of the church who said no. And that was Miss Doris Kerr Larkins...she was very committed to the historical aspect of this beautiful church that we're in and very committed to the preservation of the African American story.

She waged a war. If you really want to know with others in the community to not let this building be destroyed.

***The Wichita Beacon, Nov. 8, 1973, "Black Museum Her Dream, Red Tape Her Nightmare"***

"Mrs. Doris Larkins has a dream. A dream of a black historical museum. A dream of saving the physical structure of the old Calvary Baptist Church. But like most dreams of this nature, Mrs. Larkins is faced with bureaucratic demands.

Mrs. Larkins has lived in Wichita for 34 years, since she was 2 years old. She became associated with Calvary Baptist Church in the 1940s when her mother joined the church. She recalls vividly the bus rides from her home in northwest Wichita to the church. Her family lived then in what primarily was a white neighborhood when the family arrived at church it was like 'coming back into a Black world,' she recalls.

**Kara Heitz:**

Beginning in 1972, Doris Kerr-Larkins and other members of the congregation fought a battle against the city's downtown urban renewal plans. In 1973, they successfully saved the building from demolition.

And part of this success was Kerr-Larkins' herself. Again, Denise Sherman.

**Denise Sherman:**

I had a chance to visit with Miss Dawes, Kolchak and sister and her niece several years ago, and they described her as a very passionate, very compassionate woman. She played the organ here in the church and we had a beautiful voice and really brought a lot of soul, a lot of feeling to this, this church. And I can only imagine when she would say made the statement "This church must be saved," it really came from the heart, and which is why it was so important and why people were so compelled to join her in her movement. She was just she was just a, a congregant who loved her church and loved her god and loved her people.

**Kara Heitz:**

But saving the building was only the first step.

**Denise Sherman:**

The next stage was what to do with the building. It was her dream to convert the building into a museum or cultural center. Thus, the first national historical, thus the first National Black Historical Society of Kansas, was formed in 1974...

**Kara Heitz:**

Getting through the red tape for securing the building and establishing a museum was almost as difficult as preventing demolition. Kerr-Larkins appealed to the Wichita Urban Renewal Agency, the Historic Wichita Board, the Sedgwick County Commission, and even the Kansas State Historical Society. But Doris Kerr-Larkins and her supporters persevered. And by the late 1970s, things were looking up.

***The Wichita Beacon, December 29, 1978, "Editorial: Black culture landmarked"***

"The old red brick church with a once-handsome pillared portico and the old lodge hall stand out like sore thumbs in the area just north of the Courthouse. But rescue may be near. The buildings presently are owned by Wichita's Urban Renewal Agency, but negotiations are under way for their purchase by the Sedgwick County Commission. Creation of a black heritage museum in the church building has been the special goal of Doris Larkins, who, with other members of Wichita's black community, has helped amass a collection of archival material and artifacts relating to the flourishing black

business and professional district that grew up around the present courthouse site about the turn of the century.

**Kara Heitz:**

The Sedgwick County Commission did eventually acquire the Calvary Baptist Church building and helped to preserve it (as well as the Arkansas Valley Lodge building, another important landmark of the downtown Black community).

In 1993, the former church building was finally listed on the National Register of Historic Places. And in 1997, the historic church became the Kansas African American Museum. Doris Kerr-Larkins' dream of not just saving the church building but establishing a museum celebrating black history was finally realized. And the historical materials that she helped collect in the 1970s are part of the museum's collection today.

Denise Sherman never had a chance to personally meet Doris Kerr-Larkins, as she passed away in 1994. But Sherman has talked to individuals who knew her and knew why saving the church was so important to her.

**Denise Sherman:**

She often shared with those who weren't familiar with the early construction of this church that it was the black bricklayers who built this by hand and how symbolic it that that was for the local black community. And she said that many Wichita Black leaders, again who were very active in the early civil rights movement, were baptized in this church and including our very first African American mayor, A. Price Woodard, who was appointed. He was on the City Council and then it was appointed for a year as the first Black mayor...

**Kara Heitz:**

You definitely get a sense of this history when walking through The Kansas African American Museum today.

**Denise Sherman:**

This this this edifice gives you context when you're walking on the original one 100 plus year floor. That's wooden and slanted and soft in some places or the railings of the original church or the stained-glass windows or the steps. And to know that this was built by the Masons, by the hands of African Americans who saved their money and built this on nights and weekends over a period of several years. And to see it still stand and become very functional, it's very it has a role in it. It gives us responsibility to learn more about ourselves.

**Kara Heitz:**

But the building itself it just part of a much larger story, as Denise Sherman explains.

**Denise Sherman:**

So while the motive initially was just to save the building and save the church and not allow it to be bulldozed, if you will, because all of the other buildings and really homes

and places of our community were being destroyed, it really had a larger meaning. This this building, this church, this first Black historical society and now the museum really stands in testament of a structure, a place where more than a housing of artifacts and art and documents of our story. What we're really, we're really a statement of triumph, if you will, where we are a connection to the past and to the present.

**Kara Heitz:**

Starting in 2019, to celebrate the legacy of Kerr-Larkins, the Kansas African American Museum has given out the "The Doris Kerr Larkins "Rising Star Award." as part of their annual Trailblazers awards ceremony.

Here is how the museum describes the award:

"Ms. Kerr Larkins and many of her family and friends led the charge in the 1970s to establish the old Calvary Baptist Church Building on the National Registry of Historic Buildings, creating a home for The Kansas African American Museum. The "Rising Star Award" reminds Wichita and the state of Kansas about the sacrifice Doris Kerr Larkins made to preserve a historic piece of African American Legacy in Wichita."

In 2022, the Award was given to Wichita musician and engineer Roy Moye III. Moye is a Grammy-nominated artist who uses music and performance to get kids interested in STEM topics, especially kids from groups underrepresented in the sciences and engineering. We'll put a link to his music on the episode webpage.

**Kara Heitz:**

While the historic Calvary Baptist Church in downtown Wichita was saved from destruction, in our next story we'll hear how the African American community in Wichita's Northside also faced threats from urban renewal in the 1970s.

**SEGMENT 2 - I-135 IN WICHITA**

***Spaces to Live In, 1971***

The city has been called man's greatest achievement. It has also been called a cesspool and a human zoo. Some cities are planned, but most just grow. As cities grow larger and older, great areas within them are allowed to die.

**Robert Weems**

We cannot minimize, you know, the importance of that particular effort because, you know, the saving of Calvary and its current usage as The Kansas African American Museum is extremely important because that pretty much represented sort of the last remaining vestige...of that historic African American community...

**Kara Heitz:**

That's Robert Weems, Jr., the Garvey Distinguished Professor of Business History at Wichita State University. Weems is an expert in African American business history and has done work documenting the history of Black businesses in Wichita.



**Robert Weems**

Most of the, the impact of urban renewal in Wichita in terms of African-Americans occurred not downtown around the, the old Calvary Baptist Church, but in the McAdams neighborhood, because in fact, by the late 1950s, when urban renewal really began in earnest in downtown Wichita with the building of the new courthouse, there was only a relatively small percentage of the historic African-American community still living in the downtown area.

**Kara Heitz:**

As African Americans leave downtown Wichita, neighborhoods to the North start to look more appealing.

**Robert Weems**

Well, from what I've looked at, it was a question of, you know, more space

in the McAdams area, you know, there were, you know, from what I gather more and more spacious, you know, homes that that African Americans could move into. There was a park. That used to be called McKinley Park, but with named Miguel of Park after a local, I believe, local African American law enforcement official that have a lot of community positive community involvement.

So the park was also a positive draw for people because again, it was a place where African Americans could experience, you know, the greenery and everything you know, that we associate with the park. And that wasn't there wasn't that type of option or opportunity in the downtown area for African Americans.

**Kara Heitz:**

As the center of African American commercial and social life in Wichita moved North, the McAdams neighborhood prospered. Part of post-war prosperity in general for many Americans at mid-century, including African Americans, meant having access to home ownership. While African Americans and other people of color faced significant discrimination in accessing housing, neighborhoods like McAdams were spaces where people normally excluded from home ownership could better realize this part of the "American Dream."

However, there was another item that was also seen as an important part of post-war prosperity.

***Give Yourself the Green Light, General Motors, 1954***

This is the American dream of freedom on wheels. An automotive age traveling on time, saving superhighways, futuramas, free flowing channels of concrete and steel.

**Kara Heitz:**

The growth of the automobile and American car culture midcentury necessitated a better system of roads across the country. So, in 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower passed the Federal Highway Act, which created the Interstate system.

But while the interstate system helped improve long-distance transportation in the US, the automobile age also meant congestion, especially in urban areas.

***The City Time of Decision, 1967***

Most major cities in the world are developing hardening of the traffic arteries, bumper to bumper, air polluting. Rush hour traffic has become a way of life. Cities everywhere are searching for an answer.

**Kara Heitz:**

The building of the interstate system also coincides with the growing suburbanization of the US. More people, especially the white middle classes, are commuting into cities to work with their cars, and leaving at the end of the day to return to their new suburban communities.

By the late 1960s, post-war prosperity was in decline, especially in central cities. The phenomena of white flight, coupled with increasing deindustrialization, rising urban poverty, discriminatory housing policies, and a host of other factors, led US policymakers to identify something they called the “Urban Crisis” of the 1960s and 1970s.

***Spaces to Live In, 1971***

Not all neighborhoods are pleasant, livable places. Some deteriorate to the point where there is often no choice but to destroy the crumbling houses and start over again. Ann Turpo describes some of the hardships caused by this urban renewal process. “This looks like a deserted street, but it really is not. Three or four families still live here. More than six years ago, their friends and neighbors started moving away because urban renewal was coming to their block.”

**Kara Heitz:**

Urban renewal policies were often meant to address aspects of the “urban crisis.” However, there was a pretty clear pattern in regards to which homes and businesses were seen as “blighted” and therefore disposable.

***US Department of Transportation, Beyond Traffic: 2045 Final Report, January 9, 2017***

The construction of the interstate highway system, in ... nearly every ... major city in our nation, indelibly affected our society. In many cases, interstate routes were chosen based on areas where land costs were the lowest or where political resistance was weakest. In practice, this meant that urban interstates cut through low-income and minority communities more often than not. Done in coordination with urban renewal initiatives, the construction of urban interstates was often used as a means to remove

low-income housing, seen as slums or urban blight, to make way for new development. In fact, many of the communities destroyed by urban renewal and the construction of urban highways were once densely populated, vibrant, affordable, and accessible neighborhoods.

**Kara Heitz:**

And this scenario played out in multiple places in Kansas, including Wichita in the 1970s, with the building of interstate I-135.

***The Wichita Beacon*, Oct. 13, 1971, "Construction Scars Mark Slow Canal Route Progress Toward Distant 1977 Finish Date"**

"A vast swath of land through the heart of Wichita, from north to south city limits, is desolate and deserted. Aside from the occasional rumble of a bulldozer demolishing a home, and brisk Kansas winds gusting through trees, much of the area designed for the Canal Route (I-35W) is tranquil. In some blocks ... most property remains to be acquired for construction of the 6-lane freeway. In other areas ... some blocks have but one or two houses left to be acquired and cleared. The area from Kellogg north to 9th Street is deserted. Scars along this area created when many houses were torn out generally have been replaced by weeds.

But land from 9th North to 17th is dominated by heavy earth-moving equipment and tall, ungainly cranes. Concrete pillars, rising 16 to 20 feet into the air and sinking 40-75 feet below ground, stand in straight rows like a battalion of soldiers moving south. It is in this area that construction of the multi-million-dollar Canal Route is proceeding at a rather rapid pace.... heavy growth of underbrush and vast areas of vacant land have replaced hundreds of houses and businesses that once were beehives of activity."

**Kara Heitz:**

That neighborhood from 9th street North to 17th street, where construction was in full force, includes McAdams.

**Robert Weems**

And indeed, when we look at the impact of urban renewal in Wichita, I would argue that the building of Interstate I-135 in the 1970s had a greater impact on more African Americans than the urban renewal efforts in downtown in the 1950s and 60s.

Literally, I-135, went right through the pre-existing black community there. We saw a lot of businesses and residences that were displaced, black businesses and residences that were displaced as a result of the building of I-135.

**Kara Heitz:**

By the late 1960s, many people were aware of the negative effects of projects like urban highway construction, especially on poor people and minority communities, and activists from neighborhoods negatively affected by urban renewal policies were letting

their voices be heard. Therefore, some Urban Renewal programs in the 1970s did try to remedy the shortcomings of previous projects.

Robert Weems discusses one such example in Wichita.

**Robert Weems**

And interestingly enough, in the late 70s, there was a local agency called the Urban Renewal Agency that in fact submitted a grant to HUD in the amount of over 24 million dollars to, in fact revitalize the McAdams neighborhood.

Because again, the urban renewal agency saw what the building of I-135 did to where the majority of African Americans lived at that moment in time. And it was very interesting in that the director of planning for the Wichita Sedgwick County Planning Office, in fact, endorsed this application proposal. However, the Wichita Sedgwick County Planning Commission did not.

**Kara Heitz:**

It's not completely clear why the planning commission ultimately rejected this McAdams revitalization plan. But Weems sees this rejection in the 1970s as still impacting the community today nearly five decades later.

**Robert Weems:**

And I would argue to that part of the reason why McAdams neighborhood remains underdeveloped to this day is that for whatever reason, the Wichita Sedgwick County Planning Commission did not want to, in fact, endorse a grant for over \$24 million. That would have mitigated some of the negative impacts of the building of Interstate I-135 in the early 1970s...

That represents a sort of quintessential historical what if? Because indeed, if that proposal. Had that application been able to go forward, and if that had been funded for twenty four million dollars, we'd be have an entirely different conversation today.

**Kara Heitz:**

I asked Prof. Weems about the McAdams neighborhood today, and the overall status of Black-owned businesses in Wichita.

**Robert Weems**

In terms of where, you know, African American businesses are today, and I would say this is something that isn't just, you know, Wichita, but I had has, you know, national implications. I think, you know, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on a lot of African American businesses. You know, among other things, a lot of these people could not get the, you know, payroll protection money that other small businesses got that enabled them to stay open.

But be that as it may, and again, as someone whose research specialty, you know, is African American business history, you know, there's a certain resiliency in the Black business community here as it is in in other locales.

In fact, one of the organizations I'm involved with here is the, you know, Heartland Wichita Black Chamber of Commerce. And one of the initiatives that the chamber does to promote, you know, African American business today by linking it with the past is that there's been, you know, an establishment of a, you know, Wichita Black Business Hall of Fame.

There's a lot that obviously can be improved upon in terms of the state of current Black businesses in Wichita. But there's a certain resiliency and also too and we see this in other locales as well. We've seen a greater diversity. Of operations owned by African Americans in Wichita today than, say, we saw, you know, 100 years ago.

**Kara Heitz:**

That resiliency of communities impacted by decades of neglect and failed policies is also apparent in our next story, which links urban renewal in the 1970s in Wichita to a contemporary public art project.

**SEGMENT 3 - HORIZONTES PROJECT**

***Spaces to Live In, 1971***

All people need food, shelter and air to breathe. They also need beauty and good design. The manmade environment must serve the needs of its people. It's not enough that we build new housing. We must, in a way, create new environments.

**Kara Heitz:**

If you're in the McAdams neighborhood in the North East of Wichita, head West, and pretty soon you'll hit a lot of barriers - railroad tracks, walls, dead-end roads, and industrial spaces.

One of these barriers visible even from cars speeding along I-135 is the Beachner Grain Elevator. Until recently, it just looked just like your typical grain elevator – metal, grey, weathered exterior ... not really anything notable to look at. But that recently changed.

**Armando Minjarez**

...I had been thinking about painting a grain elevator for a long time, right. I moved to Kansas during my high school years. And if you're an artist and you live in Kansas, you have probably looked at a grain elevator and thought, Wow, wouldn't it be cool to have a painting on there? So that kind of seed of a painting and the grain elevator had been with me for, you know, since I moved to Kansas and then since I started doing the work in North Wichita, which there are a lot of grain elevators and that neighborhood and organized murals and working with different artists in that community, it kept coming up.

**Kara Heitz:**

That's Armando Minjarez, multi-disciplinary artist, community organizer, and project director of the *Horizontes* project in Wichita.

*Horizontes*, which is Spanish for Horizons, has created around 20 murals and public art projects on the northside of Wichita. The most visible of these is the Beachner grain elevator mural, which is the world's largest acrylic mural by a single artist. Executed by Columbian artist GLeo, the mural contains colorful and vibrant representations of the people who have lived and worked in North Wichita communities, including immigrants, laborers, and indigenous peoples.

The *Horizontes* project began when Minjarez was trying put together a proposal for the Knight Cities Challenge, a grant competition encouraging communities to develop economic opportunities and civic engagement in urban spaces. And while he loved the idea of a grain elevator mural, he knew that only one artwork would not be enough.

**Armando Minjarez**

So, because I had developed deep roots in that community and had done a lot of research, that's how my kind of my mind naturally went to the geography itself with a grain elevator, since it sits right along the train tracks. Like most grain elevators do. And those train tracks really go north and south in Wichita, they bisect the city. It splits a neighborhood into two right on the west side of the tracks, you have what has been historically a predominantly Mexican American neighborhood. But, you know, it's an immigrant community. You have Vietnamese immigrants there, Central American, etc.. And on the east side of the tracks, you have what historically has been the Black and African American community.

**Kara Heitz:**

We heard about the historic Black community on the east side of those tracks in our previous story. However, the community on the west side of the tracks has a similarly long and significant history in Wichita. Immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries came to Wichita beginning over a century ago to work on the railroad and also in the meat packing industry.

Many Latino families settled in the North End region of the city, establishing businesses, households, and community organizations. Similar to African Americans, the Latino community in Wichita faced discrimination and even segregation. And also like the African American community, the Latino community continued to grow in the middle of the 20th century, with the Northside neighborhood being a commercial and cultural center for Mexican Americans and other immigrant groups.

But while close in proximity, these two communities were divided.

**Armando Minjarez**

So with that project, you know, with the grain elevator sitting literally in between physically and between these two communities, it became. A visual metaphor or right for

that division that we have between black and brown people and an opportunity to start have, you know, to address, to have that conversation.

**Kara Heitz:**

For Minjarez, part of that conversation includes the ways that both African American and Latino communities in North Wichita have been subject to similar effects of urban renewal.

**Armando Minjarez**

The kind of disruptive infrastructure that you often find in those neighborhoods and communities like interstate highways or industrial corridors, right, often industrial areas are kind of that center or right next to neighborhoods to have a high population of immigrants, of people of color. So, all of those factors were present, right? We have I-135 that goes straight through the northeast, which it's the Black community. So the more you dig into it, the more you just start to understand how deep the impact right of, of that development and the economic divestment and how it's impacted the fabric throughout those communities.

**Kara Heitz:**

And that digging in and understanding this history is an important part of the *Horizontes* project. While art can't directly solve all our problems (I wish it could), the murals of *Horizontes* help to document this history as well celebrate the diversity and resilience of the black and Latino Northside communities.

**Armando Minjarez**

One of those murals that it's become one of the most popular. So many people just love it. And I see it pop up in social media accounts all the time. Is Kamala Eaton's mural as she painted a beautiful mural with these two women, a black and a brown woman holding hands up high in. And it says stronger together. And it's a really great message about that. Right, the solidarity of black and brown people. I really love the fact that she is depicting two women with dark skin. That was also really important to us. Every time I see pictures of black or brown kids posing in front of those murals, it just warms my heart to no end.

Public art in Wichita it had just really did not depict racialized people. And it's so important for us to see ourselves reflected and the art, right. That is supposed to represent the city.

**Kara Heitz:**

Another critical aspect of representing the city of Wichita in *Horizontes* murals is acknowledging the presence and impact of native peoples.

While we often (especially white people) use labels like "Latino," "Chicano," "Mexican-American" in ways that imply a kind of cultural homogeneity, a significant number of individuals who migrated to the US from Mexico and other Latin American countries have indigenous heritage. And one of the *Horizontes* murals celebrates this fact.

**Armando Minjarez**

You know, another one that it's become a really popular spot. It's at Evergreen Community Center, Fresco Exchange. This duo from Columbia, an artist, painted a mural by Lilac, which it's an Aztec god of rain. And it's also like this really beautiful blue with lots of yellows and reds and oranges.

**Kara Heitz:**

In addition to connecting Mexican American history to Aztec culture, the Evergreen Community Center mural demonstrates another crucial part of the *Horizontes* project – community involvement.

**Armando Minjarez**

And that was a really great community involvement process where they use stencils to paint that, you know, like the giant look face. So it give it providing a beautiful opportunity for a community to show up and help cut out all of the stencils and you know, just kind of build that community and have people a and give people a sense of ownership about the artwork that was being created, which is another one of the strategies that we deployed throughout the whole project is for people to participate right in the project as much as possible...

**Kara Heitz:**

The history and presence of Native Americans indigenous to the land on what is today the city of Wichita is visible in the Beachner grain elevator mural.

In the center of that mural is a female figure, wearing a bell-shaped golden-yellow skirt. That skirt is meant to evoke the grass lodges built by the Wichita people along the banks of the Arkansas River. And if you look closely, you can see two figures on her skirt, building the grass lodge she is wearing. Armando Minjarez says they call her “Miss Wichita” and she represents the indigenous foundations of the city.

**Armando Minjarez**

We have to again, as we if we are talking and by geography, if we are talking about place and in the sort of this spatial reality that we are building and creating, then we have to really then acknowledge who are here before us...And it's not just to I don't know, to give a land acknowledgment about the people they were here, which, you know, is an important thing. But it goes beyond that. It's really to honor and step aside and make space right for the indigenous people that are still here. This is still to this day, so often we talk about indigenous people to North America as if they're like this thing from the past. And the reality is that they are here.

**Kara Heitz:**

I asked Minjarez about how people in Northside communities were interacting with the murals, and the larger impact of the *Horizontes* project on the neighborhoods.



**Armando Minjarez**

You know, you see people. Posting around the murals and popping up in social media and senior pictures, you know, their graduation photos, you know this people with their graduation hat and gown in front of some of these murals, which is really great.

**Kara Heitz:**

At first glance, posting selfies in front of the murals and taking graduation pictures may not seem significant at first glance, but Minjarez sees this as meaning people in Northside communities really have developed a sense of ownership of the murals.

And this sense of ownership, of the mural being a product of the community as a whole, was also facilitated by the fact that over half of the project artists were from the Northside of Wichita.

But creating murals is only a part of *Horizontes*.

**Armando Minjarez**

So actually, as part of the project, we, we had a pretty extensive engagement process where we were interviewing people in the community, we were door knocking, having a lot of one-on-one conversations. And there's a lot of stories that came out and as you would imagine, the stories were different depending on who you were talking to that generation. The challenges were different for different generations...

**Kara Heitz:**

A grant from Humanities Kansas actually helped support this part of the *Horizontes* project.

By recording stories, taking photos, and collecting materials about the history and present lives of individuals in Northside Wichita communities, the *Horizontes* project is much more than just a public art project. It's a project that documents and celebrates African American, Latino, and other Northside communities.

All of these collected materials were part of an exhibit called "The Color Line" at the Kansas African American Museum in 2019. I find this particularly poetic given the history of the Calvary Baptist Church building we discussed in the previous segment, where the Kansas African American Museum is currently located. Five decades later, a building almost demolished through urban renewal programs helps tell the stories of other Wichitans negatively affected by urban renewal.

But the community impact of the *Horizontes* project, and simialr mural projects in other cities, can be a complicated one.

In my conversation with Armando Minjarez, I asked him about the potential role of murals in gentrification, which is kind of a contemporary form of urban renewal.

### **Armando Minjarez**

...as artists ourselves who were painting murals, right, and in neighborhoods that have a long history of segregation and discrimination, we had to be really honest with ourselves about what role we were playing as artists in those communities. Because often, like you mentioned, you know, like in places in so many cities across the country, not just Kansas City or Washington, D.C., you right that the artists are used as tools for redevelopment and eventual displacement through gentrification and. You know, we were used as a tool to, quote unquote, beautify an area, to clean it up, right, to make it look more appealing and attractive to investors and to future new tenants.

So we had to be very honest about that and think about strategies to maybe prevent some of that...Again, once the work is done. You know, we're really can't control how that development goes. But again, we wanted that conversation around art is being used as tools of displacement as well as the gentrification to be at the forefront. We wanted that, so we didn't want to shy away from that,

### **Kara Heitz:**

Art is never neutral. And public art especially. It can connect communities, tell their silenced stories, and give people a sense of ownership and pride in their neighborhoods. But it can also help usher in the very kinds of displacements that it's often trying to critique. Just like many urban renewal policies, what was often well-intended can have discriminatory consequences.

But ultimately, projects like *Horizontes* are about telling stories of people, especially people who often have not had their stories heard.

We couldn't lose the human element of this this project, because it is about community and the people living in those communities, we couldn't lose write those stories and the people. And that's what you know, when I say the art, it's not enough. It's like we have to that's a beginning to a conversation. And, to see that people that live there. It's. *Horizontes* wouldn't be what it is without see and really see and the people that live there.

### **Kara Heitz:**

So the artwork is really about creating humanities conversations, complicated, sometimes difficult, but critical conversations.

### ***No Time for Ugliness, 1965***

The center of the city. Revived and embellished. Whatever the act, whatever its scope. The common element is design and always an urgent will to make things better than they are now.

## **EPISODE CONCLUSION**

### **Kara Heitz:**

Many urban renewal policies were aimed at “making things better.” But make things better how and for whom? While many attempts to revitalize neighborhoods in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s might have been well-intended on paper, they ended up targeting and dislocating communities who already had experienced decades of discrimination and economic disadvantages.

We all want beautiful, well-functioning cities that benefit all their inhabitants. But how do we practically get there?

These questions are still as pressing today as they were in 1972. So the next time you consider these issues, also think about today’s stories from Wichita, which are just a small sampling of the effects that urban renewal policies have had on Kansans.

Consider Doris Kerr-Larkins and her hard-won fight against the demolition of the Calvary Baptist Church in Wichita as you walk through The Kansas African American Museum

Try to imagine the houses and businesses in the McAdams neighborhood that are now gone as you drive over I-135 in Wichita.

And contemplate the way urban infrastructure can divide communities with the image of a brown and black woman, arms raised in solidarity, as you go under the 13th street bridge in the North end of Wichita.

### ***The City Time of Decision, 1967***

Today, a new awareness to the problems of urban living has challenged the nation. The American city has come to its time of decision. Americans are seeking answers to problems which face their cities and cities all over the world.

Although architects, scientists and city planners have improved the American urban scene, they do not claim to know all the answers. They do know, however, that nothing they have ever done in the past will be good enough for the future.

## **SERIES OUTRO**

### **Kara Heitz:**

Catch you on the flip side!

### **Tracy Quillin:**

Humanities Kansas is an independent nonprofit leading a movement of ideas to strengthen Kansas communities and our democracy. Since 1972, HK’s pioneering programs, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark

conversations and generate insights. Together with statewide partners and supporters, HK inspires all Kansans to draw on history, literature, and culture to enrich their lives and to serve the communities and state we all proudly call home. Join the movement of ideas at [humanitieskansas.org](http://humanitieskansas.org).