

CLEO PARKER ROBINSON DANCE: HISTORIC BLACK CHURCH NOW HOME TO DANCE ENSEMBLE

How do you think a church and a dance ensemble might positively influence a neighborhood in some similar ways?

Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble was founded by Cleo Parker Robinson in 1970, and has called the former Shorter Community AME Church home since the 1980s. The space is located at 23rd and Cleveland Place in the Five Points Historic Cultural District. Five Points is unique among Denver's neighborhoods because of the rich contributions of its diverse community, particularly African Americans (Five Points-Whittier Neighborhood History).

Structure and History

St. John AME Church was organized by Bishop Thomas M. D. Ward in July 1868. The first church building, a log cabin, was erected on land donated by Major Fillmore, a Union officer in the Civil War. The church began with eighteen members, including six trustees: Gible Burrell, Samuel Cook, Alvin Cummings, Gilbert Phelps, Lewis Price and Irving Williams. The cabin served as the first church structure from 1864-1878. In 1878, a larger, brick structure was built on the corner of 19th and Stout Streets for \$2,000. In 1880, to honor the presiding Bishop, James A. Shorter, St. John AME Church was renamed Shorter Chapel (Shorter AME Church).

In 1886, the structure at 19th and Stout (currently the U.S. Federal Court House) was sold for \$15,000, and other sites were considered to build a new church home. For almost a full year and at three different locations, Shorter Chapel experienced considerable opposition from neighbors against having a Black church in their community.

In the fall of 1887, three lots on the corner of 23rd and Cleveland Place were purchased for \$9,000. One of the homes purchased with the lots was converted into the church parsonage. The church site at 23rd and Cleveland Place served as the place of worship from August 5, 1889 until April 9, 1925. In April, it is alleged that the Ku Klux Klan set fire to and completely destroyed the building. The Shorter congregation shared worship facilities with People's Presbyterian Church until Easter morning April 4, 1926. On this morning, the first service was held in the new building erected over the same location of the previous building; 23rd and Cleveland Place (Shorter AME Church).

Neighborhood

Five Points had long been home to African Americans, but it was in the first few decades of the 20th century that Five Points became the seat of Denver's African American community. By the 1870s, African American railroad workers from Georgia had established themselves and their families on 22nd Street, a precinct known as "Deep South." An analysis of residential patterns during the early 1890s demonstrates that a majority of Denver's African Americans resided within the bounds of Five Points. By the 1920s, more than 90 percent of Denver's African Americans lived within the bounds of Five Points and the adjacent Whittier neighborhood (Five Points-Whittier Neighborhood History).

Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble

Cleo Parker Robinson is the daughter of an African American actor and a White musician. She faced extreme prejudice while growing up in 1950s Denver. At the age of 10 she nearly died in Dallas when a segregated hospital refused to admit her for a kidney condition quickly enough to prevent heart failure. Doctors expected her to be bedridden the rest of her life. She overcame the condition and threw herself into dancing in order to conquer the pain from the physical condition and emotional challenges of dealing with racism. By age 15 she was teaching dance classes at the University of Colorado. She graduated from Colorado Women's College.

She is most noted for founding the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble (CPRD) in 1970. The ensemble is widely respected and recognized. It has toured internationally, performed at the Lincoln Center and received coverage and positive reviews from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*.

Distinguished performers with the ensemble have included Nejla Y. Yatkin, Cornelius Carter, Germaul Barnes and Leni Williams. They have also worked with costume designer Mary Jane Marcasiano. One of CPRD's more notable artistic creations is "Lush Life," a jazz, poetry and dance collaboration Cleo created together with Maya Angelou.

CPRD became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in 1974, continuing to build upon its dance school and ensemble origins. In four decades, they have developed into an internationally esteemed organization that operates beyond the traditional performing arts model.

There are four pillars of the organization: CPRD Ensemble; Academy; Theatre; and Education. Working in concert, CPRD programs have created an oasis where a varied population—by gender, race, age and ethnicity—gather to study and appreciate a modern, cross-cultural approach to creative community development. CPRD serves as a convener of community, art and dance (Who We Are).

References

Denver Public Library. Five Points-Whittier Neighborhood History. Retrieved from <https://history.denverlibrary.org/five-points-whittier-neighborhood-history>.

Shorter AME Church. Retrieved from shorterame.org.

Cleo Parker Robinson Dance. Who We Are. Retrieved from <https://cleoparkerdance.org/who-we-are/>.