

Talking About a Vanished Place
By Anna Eisenstein



How do people talk about the past? How can that help us understand the way they think about the social world? Professor Smith and I have been asking these questions through our research with former Easton residents. Certain Easton neighborhoods were displaced in the 1960s when the city carried out redevelopment projects. We have been tracking down residents to ask them about their lives before the demolitions. They tell us of a tight-knit neighborhood, wrought with strong community values across diverse ethnic commitments, and families grappling with issues of ethnicity and class as they lived and worked in this lively city.

On October 2nd, we will be holding our third reunion for former students of Easton's Taylor School. Although the school no longer stands, the elderly folks who once went to elementary school there express clear, distinct, visual memories. They love to talk about the buildings they remember and to see old photographs and maps. These items seem to have helped corroborate the individuals' memories, validating their images of the vanished neighborhood. Now in touch with one another again, the residents intend to hold reunions regularly where they can talk about the old neighborhood and the different people, experiences, and world they remember together. Their excitement has energized this project; from the beginning, they showed us that there was a story to be told.

We have met some wonderful people throughout the process. It's fun to start learning how to listen to them. What stories are they telling, *what* are they saying and *how* do they say it? After sifting through pages upon pages of interview transcripts and reading endless literature about language, memory, place and ethnic identity, it's exciting to see the way the ideas interact in the residents' narratives. What at first seemed like a contradiction in their collective story has led Professor Smith and me to explore the underlying dynamics of the community they remember.