*Chapter 3*

# URBAN RENEWAL . . .

Cities are always growing or shrinking, hence remaking themselves. Sometimes this reordering is haphazard, and sometimes it is planned, carried out according to the agendas of those paying for the improvements. The messy, medieval city of Paris came in for such planned improvement, and it was the first capital city to be rebuilt without a massive fire first clearing the land. The coup d'état that made Louis Napoleon Bonaparte emperor of France in 1852 gave him the absolute power needed to undertake the massive renovation of Paris. He had three major goals: to bring water into the city and to improve the circulation of air among the buildings; to unify its parts; and to make it more beautiful. A powerful administrator was needed, given that this massive project was to be carried out while the busy life of the capital went on around it. In 1853, the emperor selected Georges-Eugène Haussmann, whom he made a baron, to be that man.[1]

Though Haussmann's name is the one attached to the changes in Paris and many other French cities, he was not the person who created the ideas. Rather, the plans drew on wisdom acquired during several hundred years of city making. Years earlier, kings of France,



eager to make their capital as beautiful as Rome, had begun deciphering the strategies needed to achieve that end. The leaders that followed them added to those aesthetic concerns the need to control frequent epidemics, such as those caused by raw sewage running in the narrow alleyways of the city. As the years passed and modes of transportation changed, the people of Paris found that they couldn't move through the narrow medieval streets squeezed between the tightly packed buildings; street widening became a pressing goal of city beautification.

Over the years, a concept evolved. At its heart was the creation of wide avenues called *percées* ("pierced"), because they were to cut diagonally through the old city's massive blocks of housing. By the mid-nineteenth century, a few of these avenues had been created with great success. Their width permitted light and air to enter the city and their style added to its beauty.

Haussmann's job was to apply these proven techniques on a scale large enough to transform the city. At the same time, while the streets were being carved out of the old city, sewers could be installed. A new street face was installed, incorporating buildings, street lamps, *pissoirs,* and other "street furniture" carefully designed to create unity in the "look" of Paris as one traveled from arrondissement to arrondissement, ward to ward.

In the series of figures shown here, we see the section of Paris that was "pierced" to create Avenue de l'Opéra, one of the greatest of the Haussmann boulevards. In the first map, we see the outlines of the tight and somewhat random streets of the old Paris. In the second map, we see the proposal for a boulevard to cut diagonally through the urban tissue. In the final map, we see the Paris of today, with Avenue de l'Opéra successfully built.

Lithographs drawn while the piercing was in progress show the deep trenches that were dug to permit the placement of the sewers. We also see the sorrow of those who were moved away. Although most of the housing destroyed in the center was eventually replaced, its costs were prohibitive for the poor, who were forced to move to outlying areas that were added to the city during the Haussmann period.

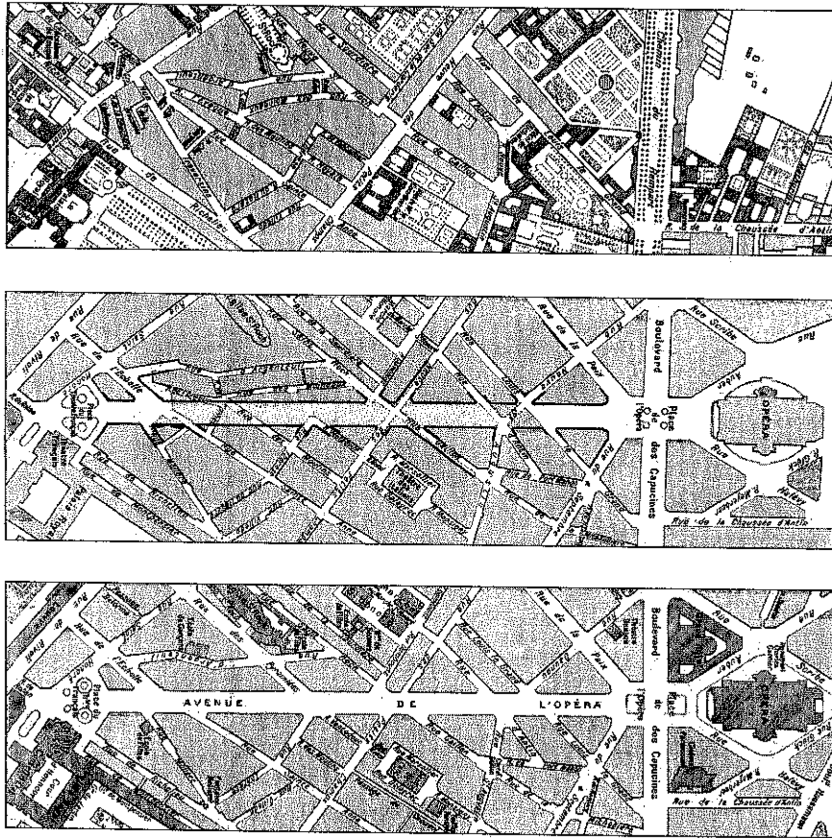



Fig. 3.1. The strategic design of renovations in Paris in the area of the Avenue de l'Opéra. Upper plan: the area as it appeared under Louis XV, 1773. Middle plan: the plan for the new avenue overlaid on the existing street grid, in 1876. Lower plan: actual construction (in 1929). REPRODUCED FROM *L'ILLUSTRATION*, 1929.

It is not, I think, an accident that social critic Victor Hugo—one of thousands of republicans exiled under the Empire—used the images of sewers to animate the persecution of Jean Valjean in his 1861 masterpiece, *Les Misérables.* Nor was it an accident that the new boulevards became a central character in the paintings of the Impressionist school and on the picture postcards of the era. The city's transformation aroused the pain and the wonder of the population.

In 2000, I spent two months living in a neighborhood bounded by two great Haussmann boulevards—Boulevard Saint Michel and Boulevard Saint Germain des Prés. Every day I walked through the old city into the new, examining the manner in which Haussmann

Fig. 3.2. Root shock in Paris. Compare with root shock in Pittsburgh, fig. 7.3, and root shock in New York after 9/11, fig. 8.5. Upper lithograph: Honoré Daumier. From the series "Locataires et Propriétaires": Scene from a neighborhood in process of demolition. REPRODUCED COURTESY OF THE PHOTOTHÈQUE DES MUSÉES DE LA VILLE DE PARIS. Lower lithograph: Demolition for the Avenue de l'Opéra. REPRODUCED FROM *L'ILLUSTRATION*, 1929.

had cut the great boulevards at an angle through the urban fabric and had pasted the new Paris over the old.

French urbanist Michel Cantal-Dupart wrote of that neighborhood, "At the base of Boulevard Saint Michel, Haussmann had demolished the Church of Saint André des Arts, which was the parish church for the riverside neighborhood that stretched from the Pont Neuf to the Pont Saint Michel. According to their residence east or west of the new boulevard, the parishioners were reassigned to Saint Germain or Saint Séverin. One was in the 6th *arrondissement,* and the other in the fifth. Boulevard Saint Michel, although it united traffic towards Paris, proved to be an almost unassailable obstacle to the urbanism of the neighborhood. Though it has been more than a century since the demolition of the church, the neighborhood has remained disorganized. The village never regained its authenticity. It had lost an essential organ."[2]

The sense I was getting—that the renovation entailed a massive, irreparable upheaval—was heightened by the realization that Haussmann was thrown out of office in 1870. At about the same time as the fall of Haussmann, Emperor Napoleon III entered into a disastrous war with Germany. France was quickly beaten back, and a siege laid around Paris. Over the months of the siege, and during the peace negotiations that followed, residents of the city lost whatever faith they had had in the emperor's government. In fact, that government collapsed and was replaced by a provisional government, which appeared to be just as unreliable in its negotiations with Germany and in its treatment of the capital. Obviously, much had happened by the point at which, in an effort to save the country and themselves, the working people of Paris rose up in revolt and declared a new democratic government, the Paris Commune.

War, siege, and abandonment by the national government might seem to have been enough to provoke the Commune. Research has demonstrated that upheaval played a part as well. The Commune was organized by people who had been displaced from the center of the city by the Haussmannian renovations. Living and struggling together in the newly annexed peripheral arrondissements, the displaced people had gathered strength and solidarity from one another.[3] Displacement both added to the other layers of frustration and reorganized neighboring, creating new spaces within which relationships and ideas were developed.



The Commune, with its generous reforms and democratic concerns, was quickly overthrown. A bloodbath ensued, during which as many as thirty thousand Communards were murdered. Reading this part of the story of Paris provided me with new ways to think about urban renewal and its consequences. I thought it was probably a good idea that the United States hadn't gone to war just after urban renewal. Then I remembered Vietnam.

## The Housing Act of 1949

The term "urban renewal" is used generically to refer to improvements in cities. In the United States the phrase is also used to refer to a program of the federal government, begun under the Housing Act of 1949, and modified under a number of later acts, the most important of which, the Housing Act of 1954, actually introduced the term into the law. Those acts were designed to provide the money for retooling the city, preparing for the postwar era, and switching from the war machine to new means of productivity. In 1950s America, urban renewal was a synonym for "progress."[4]

Progress meant new technologies, new jobs, and—here is where urban renewal comes in—new uses for the land. Those who sought to maintain the old city stood in the way of progress, and *progress* was a magic word back then: normally honest people would hide their true feelings on any issue in order to be able to say, "I'm for progress."[5] General Electric went a step forward, reminding us through its advertisements, "Progress is our most important product."

Reclaiming land for new uses has an important precedent in American history in the abrogation of treaties with Native Americans. In the beginning of the westward push, Native Americans were asked to move west of the Appalachians. Then they were asked to move west of the Mississippi. Then they were settled on reservations, which were

relocated repeatedly. In the 1950s, children like me grew up with the story of Native Americans being settled on wasteland dotted with black puddles, but being moved when it was discovered that those black puddles were oil.

There is a joke that circulated on email a few years ago. It went like this. Two Navajos, an old man and his grandson, were walking on the reservation one day and ran into a group of white scientists from NASA, standing around a spacecraft. The grandson asked what they were doing and the scientists explained they were preparing a trip to the moon. The grandson translated this to the old man, who spoke only Navajo. The old man pondered this information for a moment, then asked if he could send a message to the Man in the Moon. The NASA scientists, amused by this request, got out their tape recorder. The old man spoke briefly in Navajo and nodded with satisfaction when he was done. The scientists asked the grandson what he had said. He told the Man in the Moon, "Watch out, they've come to take your land."[6]

The land-claiming strategy embodied in the Housing Act of 1949 was straightforward. An interested city had first to identify the "blighted" areas that it wished to redo. Having defined "slum" and "ghetto," we must add this concept of blight, which was invented specifically for purposes of redoing aging downtown areas, and meant, quite simply, that buildings had lost their sparkle and their profit margin.[7] Quite a remarkable array of buildings could fit under the definitions of blight that were enacted into law.[8]

Once those areas had been defined, the city had the task of developing a "workable plan." This had largely to do with figuring out a new use for the area once it was cleared of blight. The workable plan was forwarded to regional urban renewal offices for approval by the federal government. Once the plan was approved, the designated areas could be seized using the government's power of eminent domain. The people and businesses that occupied the site were given a minimal amount of compensation and were sent away. The seized land was then cleared of all buildings and, thanks to federal subsidies, sold to developers at a fraction of the city's costs. The developers then built



businesses, educational and cultural institutions, and residences for middle- and upper-income people. In some instances, high-rise public housing projects were built on the cleared land.[9]

Marc Weiss summed up the overall impact of the twenty-four-year program by saying, "Urban renewal agencies in many cities demolished whole communities inhabited by low income people in order to provide land for private development of office buildings, sports arenas, hotels, trade centers, and high income luxury buildings."[10] Rather than providing decent homes and suitable living environments, urban renewal created a massive housing crisis. Weiss noted, "As of June 30, 1967, 400,000 residential units had been demolished in urban renewal areas, while only 10,760 low-rent public housing units had been built on these sites."[11] You might well ask: How did a plan that subsidized developers, and dramatically worsened the conditions of the poor, come to be the law of the land?

## Saving Downtown

American business leaders and mayors of large cities believed that the civic organization that had evolved over the first part of the twentieth century, that is, a central downtown surrounded by an array of manufacturing, trading, and residential areas, was becoming obsolete as the population began to overrun the borders and fill the nearby suburbs. In their view, a postwar retooling of the American city was needed, one designed to respond to the changing spatial dynamics and to prepare for competition with other nations. The changing needs of American capitalism were the impetus for the reorganization of the cities, and it was powerful men who sought solutions and pushed for their enactment into law. Weiss noted: "Urban renewal owes its origins to downtown merchants, banks, large corporations, newspaper publishers, realtors, and other institutions with substantial business and property interests in the central part of the city."[12]

In Pittsburgh, for example, the leadership for urban renewal came from the Allegheny Conference on Post-War Community Planning, a group of civic and business leaders that was started in 1943 to chart

the course for ensuring the city's prosperity. A photograph of the executive committee of the conference depicts a large group of white men, dressed to suggest wealth and authority, and seated under portraits of two members of the Mellon banking family.[13] Just to list those seated in the first row:

- Edward J. Hanley, vice president of the conference and president, Allegheny Ludlum Steel Corporation;
- Edward J. Magee, executive director of the conference;
- Leon Falk, Jr., industrialist;[14]
- John T. Ryan, Jr., chairman of the conference and president, Mine Safety Appliances Company;
- Carl B. Jansen, president of the conference and chairman of the board, Dravo Corporation;
- Gwilym R. Price, vice president of the conference and chairman of the board, Westinghouse Electric Corporation;
- Leslie B. Worthington, president, United States Steel Corporation;
- John A. Mayer, vice president of the conference and president, Mellon National Bank and Trust Company.

Conspicuously absent from the picture, and from the decision-making processes, were poor people, black people, and women. One way of understanding urban renewal is to contrast the discourse that was taking place in different settings. Clearly, when the industrialists themselves were at the table, the looming and fundamental changes in methods and places of production were part of the conversation.

Outside of those rooms, however, the public concern of white officials was largely cast as physical improvements that entailed "no social loss." George Evans, a member of the Pittsburgh City Council, wrote a 1943 article that put forward the public face of urban renewal. In "Here Is a Postwar Job for Pittsburgh . . . Transforming the Hill District," Evans argued, "The Hill District of Pittsburgh is probably one of the most outstanding examples in Pittsburgh of neighborhood deterioration . . . There are 7,000 separate property owners; more than 10,000 dwelling units and in all more than 10,000 buildings. Approximately 90 per cent of the buildings in the area are substandard and have long outlived their usefulness, and so there would be *no social loss* if they were all destroyed. The area is criss-crossed with streets running every which way, which absorb at least one-third of the area. These streets should all be vacated and a new street pattern overlaid. This would effect a saving of probably 100 acres now used for unnecessary streets."[15] (emphasis added)



The Hill District, which served as a newcomer neighborhood of Pittsburgh, had welcomed tens of thousands of African Americans to the city in the first half of the twentieth century. For those migrants, the tight streets of the Hill were not a waste of territory, but the nidus for making essential relationships.

As Sala Udin, who grew up in the Hill District and later served as its councilman, put it, "The sense of community and the buildings are related in an old area. The buildings were old, the streets were cobblestone and old, there were many small alleyways and people lived in those alleyways. The houses were very close together. There were small walkways that ran in between the alleyways that was really a playground. So, the physical condition of the buildings helped to create a sense of community. We all lived in similar conditions and had similar complaints about the wind whipping through the gaps between the frame and the window, and the holes in the walls and the leaking and the toilet fixtures that work sometimes and don't work sometimes. But that kind of common condition bound us together more as a community. I knew everybody on my block, and they knew me. They knew me on sight, and they knew all the children on sight, and my behavior changed when I entered the block. And so, I think there was a very strong sense of community."

For Thelma Lovette, Barbara Suber, Henry Belcher, Agnes Franklin, George Moses, Ken Nesbitt, and others I talked to from the Hill, those close-knit relationships were essential to life. The dispersal of the community and the loss of those connections had ominous implications. Thus, a third part of the discourse on the changing city was the African American community's sense of threat, which was captured in the expression "Urban Renewal Is Negro Removal."[16]

But George Evans, writing before the integration of baseball, be-

fore the integration of schools or buses, was living in a world that promulgated racist imaginings while prohibiting genuine contact. The power structure offered no forum for Thelma Lovett or any other African Americans to argue for their version of reality. Furthermore, George Evans could speak in that manner with the full backing of white social scientists who, themselves no better informed than George Evans, concluded that African American communities were "disorganized," the technical term for "no social loss." In the words of a leading academic researcher, "The Negro who hesitates to leave Harlem or the South Side is chiefly reacting negatively to the unknown 'white man's world' out there. His own fellow ethnics share no distinctive heritage excepting a rural origin and a common reaction to the rejection by white society."[17]

## Tension Building Up . . .

Geographer Harold M. Rose, who has contributed a great deal to our understanding of the geography of African American urban settlement, depicted the ghetto as a triangle sitting on the half circle of downtown.[18] Public health students, when asked to free-associate to this image, came up with a string of dynamic words:

- Paternalistic
- Tipping
- Constrained
- Enveloped
- Disconnection
- Oppression
- Penetration

These words, and many more like them, get at the charged and unstable relationships among the disparate parts of the city. Let us consider the relationship suggested by the triangle of ghetto squatting on downtown. One of the groups interested in urban renewal was the downtown business district, which hoped to entice the rich to move



back downtown by sprucing up the decor. "Just think of what would happen to our downtown business district, with all the surplus buying power within walking distance of the center of the community," Milwaukee city attorney Walter J. Mattison enthused in 1944.[19]

In order to convert the downtown to a shopping mall for the rich, it was necessary, the leaders thought, to rebuild it in a glossy and modern fashion. They began this process even before the federal urban renewal process was invented, but their work was expanded and accelerated once federal funds were available. The model of the new world city had been proposed by the architect Le Corbusier.[20] Its dominant feature was a "tower in the park," a tall building surrounded by grass or open space. Cartoonist Jean-François Batelier, observing

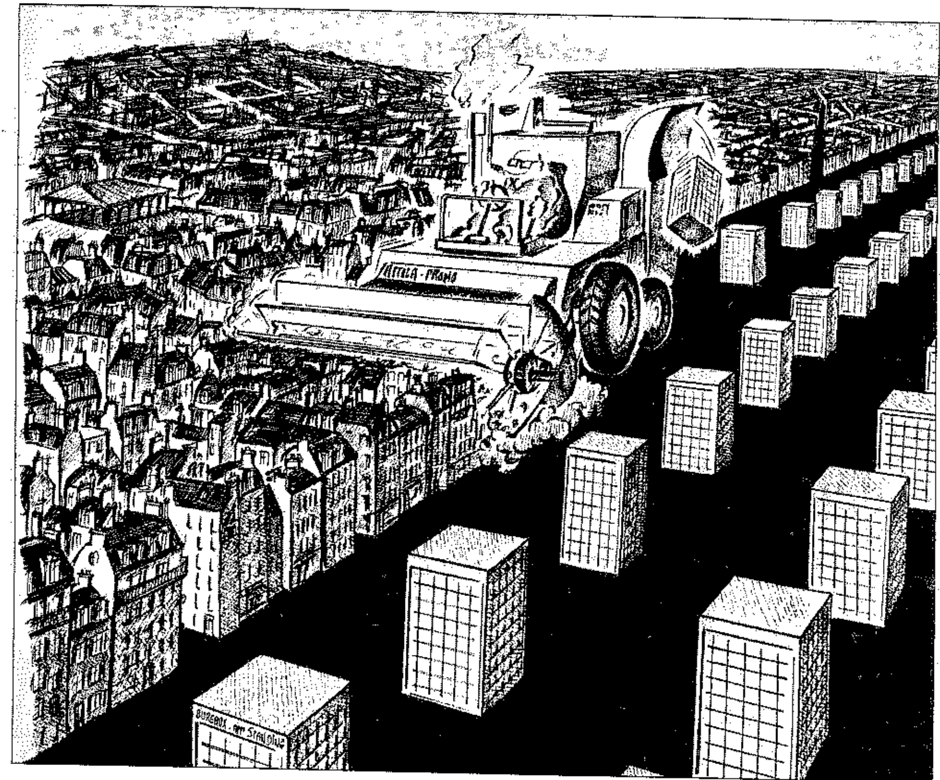


Fig. 3.3. Jean-François Batelier. Corbu combine. Modeled after the machines that cut and bail hay at the same time, this machine winnows old buildings and spits out new towers. Compare these images to the images of "empty" and "full" in chapter 8. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

the cookie-cutter fashion in which people were bulldozing cities and putting up towers-in-the-park, thought of the idea of a "Corbu combine," shown here in action.[21]

Though downtown business leaders were interested in clearing blight, ghetto areas seemed to offer a two-fer: clear blight and clear blacks. They had at their disposal two mechanisms that ultimately worked synergistically to help clear the land: one was urban renewal, and the other was the federal highway program. Imagine, then, the triangle of the ghetto diminished by the half circle of downtown completing itself by urban renewal, while highway construction took a juicy slice, generally aimed straight down the middle.

Inherent in taking land is the implication that former residents have to go someplace else, as the working people were moved to the periphery of Paris and the Native Americans were moved to reservations. In many cities, there was literally no place for the displaced black people to go. White people who lived in neighborhoods adjacent to the ghetto were completely opposed to any expansion of "black territory," and they organized to protect their turf. Neighborhood groups were formed to exert political, social, and economic pressure against African Americans who sought to move in. Others organized vigilante groups that carried out terrorist attacks. Whites also used physical barriers to prevent black movement out of the ghetto.[22]

To a large extent, planners had control over the directions in which people could move, and the spaces they would occupy. Their thinking was guided by explicit concepts, described in publications for planning professionals, of hiding and marginalizing the poor. Their tools included using highways, massive buildings, parking lots, and open space as barriers; eliminating connecting streets to inhibit travel in and out; and housing people in public housing projects that were cut off from the flow of the city. In this photograph of the Hill District (fig. 3.4), the clear plastic, cut in the shape of the proposed changes, is overlaid on the existing habitat of the Hill District, the tight streets that held no social value for George Evans but were home to Sala Udin. One goal of the construction of wide roads and the civic



arena was the creation of a swath of uninhabited territory, a buffer zone, thus achieving a separation between downtown and the ghetto.

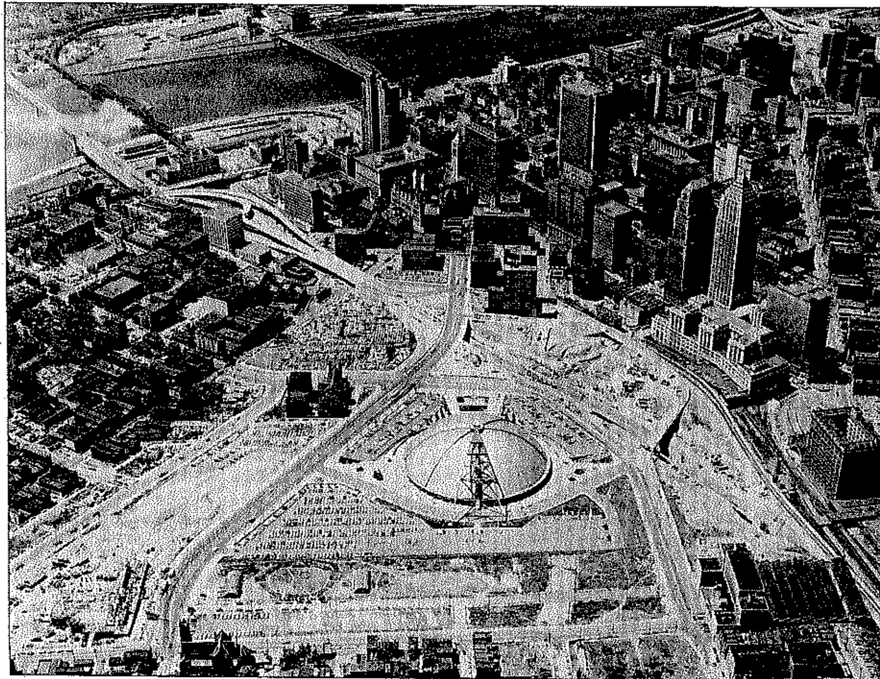
While the downtown leaders planned to take land, and thus decrease the size of the ghetto, the arrival of Southern refugees of the Second Great Migration was creating pressures in the opposite direction. We can well imagine the horror and frustration of those seeking to stabilize the fading center city as they watched, not the return of the rich, but the swelling of the numbers of the poor, and the accompanying reality that the squatting ghetto would need to grow. Focusing on the triangle of the ghetto itself, we must add to the penetration at its tip, an insistent swelling on every side.

Four major options were open to American cities at that point. The option that had the best long-term potential for the nation was open housing. That would have meant the end of the residential segregation and the opening of all neighborhoods for black residence.[23] There are very few places in the United States where this occurred.

The second possibility was that white people would leave for the suburbs, thus leaving behind new areas for black residency. This was a frequent solution, with two negative consequences. First, white people had to abandon their own urban homes and urban traditions. Second, white people controlled most of the wealth and most of the institutions of the city. They took their money and kept their power, creating an imbalance that shapes urban and suburban realities to this day.

The third option was for the city to maintain the ghetto boundaries, but accommodate newcomers by building large housing projects within the existing black area. Chicago is the most notable example of this strategy,[24] which was guaranteed to create areas with large populations of very poor people. This concentration of the impoverished was aggravated by the poor design and minimal equipment of the housing projects. In general, they lacked the features that made urban slums a place to get a toehold in the nation's economy. Thus, in the long run, housing projects could only make the poor poorer. As early as 1972, with the implosion of the Pruitt-Igoe projects in St. Louis,[25] city leaders began to disassemble these dysfunc-

Fig. 3.4. Renovations to the Lower Hill. Upper photograph: Photographer unknown. Aerial photograph of proposed renovations to the Lower Hill, 1956. Lower photograph: Photographer unknown. Aerial photograph of completed Civic Arena, 1961. COURTESY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ROOM, CARNEGIE LIBRARY, PITTSBURGH.



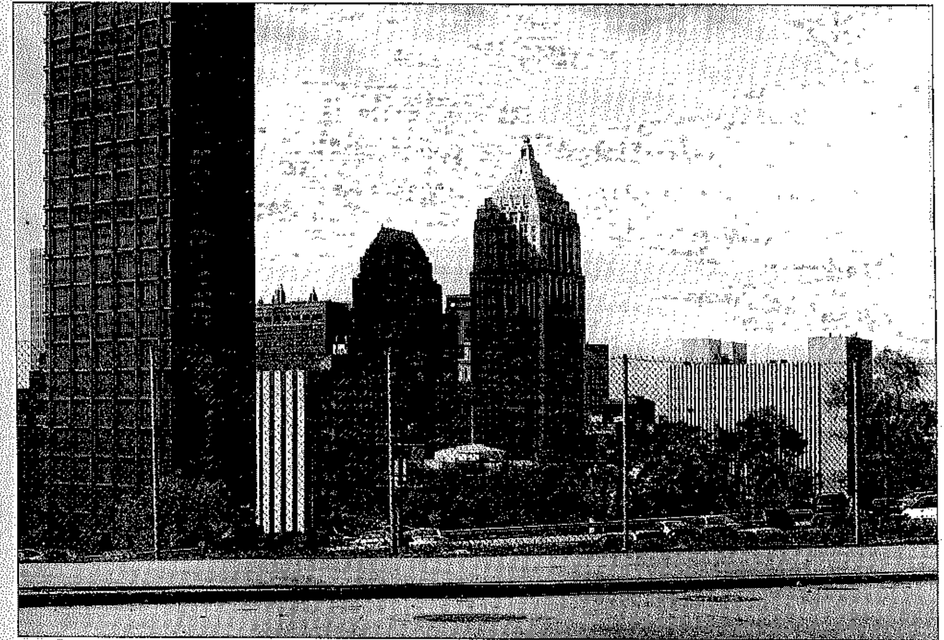


Fig. 3.5. How urban renewal changed Webster Avenue. Upper photograph: Russell Lee. Webster Avenue, looking downtown from the Hill District before urban renewal. COURTESY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ROOM, CARNEGIE LIBRARY OF PITTSBURGH. Lower photograph: Rich Brown. Webster Avenue, looking downtown from the Hill District, 2003. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

tional complexes, a process that accelerated when Congress passed the HOPE VI initiative in 1992. HOPE VI, originally called the "Urban Revitalization Demonstration," was a Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program designed to solve the problems of badly designed and poorly run public housing projects, which HUD had named "severely distressed housing." Of course, as with urban renewal, HOPE VI's bulldozing of broad swaths of urban land swept away the good with the bad, in the same way that clear-cutting a forest does far more than harvest trees.

The fourth option was for the city fathers to continue the policies of containment that governed ghetto life. That proved to be a disastrous choice, because, as geographer John Adams has pointed out, those do-nothing cities violated nature's "law of proportions." That law states, "Any living organism thrives at only one scale . . . it will collapse of its own weight if size is doubled, tripled or quadrupled and proportions are held constant."[26] Adams's study of midwestern cities found that, though black population was increasing rapidly, housing was actually being lost. Thus, the ratio of people to housing was doubling and tripling, until people couldn't take it anymore, and civil insurrection broke out. Though somewhat less coherent than the Paris Commune or the Montgomery bus boycott, those insurrections represented an equally distinct mass movement, this time against the spatial squeeze the community was under. In simple terms, people burned a doorway into new living space.

The American ghetto revolts of the 1960s were tightly linked to urban renewal, according to the report of the National Commission on Civil Disorders, popularly known as the Kerner Commission.[27] That report, which is a seminal work on segregation in the United States as well as the classic investigation of the outbreak of civil disorder in the summer of 1967, noted that inadequate housing was the number-three grievance among people the commission surveyed in fifteen cities and four suburbs. The report noted that "In Detroit a maximum of 758 low-income housing units have been assisted through [federal] programs since 1956 . . . Yet, since 1960, approximately 8,000 low-income units have been demolished for urban renewal.



"Similarly, in Newark, since 1959, a maximum of 3,760 low-income housing units have been assisted through the programs considered . . . During the same period, more than 12,000 families, mostly low-income, have been displaced by such public uses as urban renewal, public housing and highways.

"In New Haven, since 1952, a maximum of 951 low-income housing units have been assisted . . . Yet, since 1956, approximately 6,500 housing units, mostly low-income, have been demolished for highway construction and urban renewal."[28]

Though the renovations of Paris were often cited by planners who were remaking American cities, few people pondering ghetto uprisings were also thinking back to Baron Haussmann. Yet one can trace many parallels between the Haussmann era and the urban renewal era: government that stifled dissent (the empire in France, the McCarthy era in the United States); remarkable bureaucrats (Haussmann in France, Robert Moses and others in the United States); massive displacement of poor people (moving the poor to the newly annexed arrondissements in Paris, and moving the poor outside of the renewal area or to housing projects within the ghetto area in the United States); and popular revolts (the Paris Commune in France, civil insurrection in the United States).

In comparing urban renewal in these two countries, I find that the distributive property of urban renewal is rarely adequately addressed. One observer of dam building in India made a similar observation and reported, ". . . an officer representing the Madhya Pradesh Government . . . treated [resettlement] lightly. He said in a very casual way that many tribals who were asked to leave their forest homes were volunteering to go and settle down in cities like Bhopal. He appeared to believe that the project was a od [*sic*] send opportunity for those people to modernise themselves. I am mentioning this because it shows how happy an administrator could be if he can remain immune to the realities around him and does not have to know the feeling of the poor tribals who have to leave their homes."[29]

In India, as in the United States, the failure to appreciate the costs that upheaval places on the poor means that grossly inadequate plans are made for resettlement. Issues of community life, transition to new

forms of work, emotional pain of separating from a beloved place: all of these considerations are given short shrift. The frustration of the displaced, then, comes as a shock to the planners who worked from the illusion that the changes were a godsend to the people in the way of progress.

At the same time, comparing France and the United States in their urban renewal efforts leads to another issue. Most people would agree that the French planners greatly improved their city, while the United States was not so fortunate. The French effort worked from the specific concept of the *percée*, with construction following immediately on the heels of demolition. The project included carefully orchestrated designs for buildings and sidewalks that created exciting urban boulevards.

The American planners, by contrast, cleared broad swaths of land for Corbusian parks; had little control over rebuilding, which was sometimes separated by decades from the demolition phase of a project; and placed even more unreasonable burdens on the poor and the people of color than did the French. Indeed, in looking at American urban renewal projects I am reminded more of wide-area bombing—the largely abandoned World War II tactic of bombing major parts of cities as we did in Würzburg, Germany, and Hiroshima, Japan[30]—than of elegant city design.

In searching for a deeper understanding of this complex and agonizing American process of urban renewal, I found it essential to speak to planners and historians. But, even more important, I needed to speak to uprooted people, and especially African Americans, as their experience has been largely overlooked in the historical record.

*Chapter 4*

# . . . MEANS NEGRO REMOVAL

Roanoke is a beautiful American city, situated in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains along the Roanoke River in southwest Virginia. It was first settled as a stop on the Great Wagon Road, a major colonial trail that followed an Iroquois route from Philadelphia, through Harpers Ferry, down through Virginia, and then west through the Cumberland Gap.[1] Roanoke was a "western" town until late in the 1800s. Its rough frontier style confronted grace and culture after the Norfolk and Western Railway established its headquarters there in 1888, and the railroad brought executives and their wives in from Philadelphia, Baltimore, and other eastern centers.

In 1906, the wealthy white women of the area, appalled by unsanitary and unseemly conditions, organized the Women's Civic Betterment Club, under the leadership of Mrs. Lucien H. Cocke, president, and Mrs. M. M. Caldwell, vice president.[2] Their efforts were remarkably farsighted. Among other projects, they sponsored Boston landscape architect John Nolen to develop a town plan for the growing city. Characterized by well-laid-out neighborhoods, and parks along the banks of the river, the plan echoed many of the themes

Frederick Law Olmsted and others were bringing to American city planning. The enlightenment of the white city mothers was not met by equal clarity on the part of the white city fathers: the 1907 plan, "Remodeling Roanoke," which has been recognized in the annals of city planning as a National Historic Planning Landmark, languished on the shelf. Instead, with all the gusto of the American frontier, the leaders of Roanoke focused on making money.

The emphasis on grace and harmony, though defeated at the level of the city, did lead to the creation of remarkable neighborhoods composed of well-designed houses closely spaced on tree-lined streets, within easy walking distance of shops and services. Though each home is uniquely designed, they share common features, such as wide front porches. The close placement of the homes creates a solid backdrop, framing the activity on the sidewalks and the streets. The streets themselves are wide enough for cars, but narrow enough to retain the connection between the houses on either side. An air of serenity hangs over the area. My first night in Roanoke, staying at Mary Bishop's house, I was lulled to sleep by the trills of birds and insects, the rustle of leaves and the closeness of the natural world, yet we were not two blocks from a corner store stocked with daily essentials and a friendly clerk. The New Urbanists, who in the 1990s have issued a challenge to re-create such neighborhoods in American cities, might have taken their inspiration from the remarkable historic neighborhoods of Roanoke. Even after a brief visit, I resonated with the local residents' pride in their city.

## Mary Bishop and the Story of Urban Renewal

There are stories within stories, and at the heart of this book about urban renewal lies Mary Bishop's concern with the untold stories of vulnerable people. Her heart is gripped by such stories, and her work won't stop until they are told. She stumbled onto the urban renewal story accidentally. "I had been at the newspaper [*Roanoke Times*] and we would take turns pulling the weekend shift. I was working one Saturday and they told me there was going to be a neighborhood reunion, which is often just a little feature story.[3] There are so many of those. And so I looked into it, and it was the neighborhood Northeast. I knew that there was some Northeast Roanoke still, but I didn't know who these folk were, so I called them, and they told me that their neighborhood didn't exist anymore.



"I then went to see a few people, especially Charles Meadows, who is in the story 'Street by Street,' and he drove me around among all of these industrial buildings, and the post office, and the gas company, and by the McDonald's and the Days Inn. And I had only been in Roanoke two or three years at that point, and he began to re-create for me what was once there, which was totally new to me. I had no idea. And, of course, the interstate coming through. And I remember him driving up by the Roanoke Gas Company, and pointing to a picnic bench out there, and he said, 'That's where my house was.' Of course, the streets had all changed and it was hard for me to imagine.

"But anyway, because of that event, and preparing for that reunion, I saw that something really big was going on. And when I went to the reunion, people said, 'You need to look into this. This is a big story here. Something that nobody remembers very well, and it has never been written about.' "

Getting into the story took a long time. Winning the trust of people was difficult, both because the newspaper had been an apologist for urban renewal and because Mary Bishop was white. Understanding the process was hard, and locating the lost terrain required extraordinary efforts of imagination, even for people who had lived there. But Mary persevered over three years and a hundred interviews. By the end, she had traced the fate of every house in the area, and was able to create an extraordinary map, detailing what had happened to the homes, businesses, and institutions of black Roanoke. "Street by Street, Block by Block" was quite a literal description of what she had accomplished in depicting the process at the level of every building in the affected areas.[4]

Mary Bishop's assessment of the effects of urban renewal offers an extraordinary window into the impact on the people displaced. "We still don't see urban renewal as a destructive force, because it hadn't been written, it had never been said really, except among a few academics a few years ago; people didn't see what had hit them. They

didn't see the deep trauma, the assault almost. I am sure that people died as a result of this. I am sure they died way prematurely." In this chapter, I use Mary Bishop's work, supplemented by my own visits and interviews, to tell the overlooked story of urban renewal in Roanoke, which, as far as I can tell, is the story of urban renewal all across the nation.[5]

Mary Bishop's story is subtitled "How urban renewal uprooted black Roanoke." It spans four decades, beginning with the first urban renewal project in 1955, which was called the Commonwealth project, involving eighty-three acres located in a section of the city known as Northeast. Northeast was situated just north of the central business district, and housed a poor but striving portion of the black community. The Commonwealth project was followed in 1964 by the Kimball project, which destroyed the remaining portion of Northeast. In 1968, a third urban renewal project was designated for Gainsboro, the neighboring African American community. Unlike Commonwealth and Kimball, which quickly bulldozed massive sections of the Northeast neighborhood, the Gainsboro project followed a more leprotic process, slowing eating away at the neighborhood until only a tattered shadow remained to remind people of the once-vibrant area. In 1995, when Mary Bishop published her landmark study, to all intents and purposes, the African American community of Roanoke had been dispossessed from its original place of settlement.

The study went block by block, street by street. In the accompanying map, reproduced here, you can see what happened to each and every one of the buildings that dotted the area.[6]

*Commonwealth, 1955*

As in all urban renewal projects, the Commonwealth area was first declared "blighted" so that the homes and businesses could be leveled for new uses—even the area's hills were bulldozed.

The white power structure supported the process. "It had to be done," former councilwoman Mary Pickett told Mary Bishop, ". . . for the good of the city, for the good of the future. Their kids were growing up in slum conditions . . . That was prime growth land. Some people had to suffer."[7]



Fred Mangus, for decades a member of the city housing authority's board, remembered, "You used to go for a ride on Sunday, and it was pitiful, children sitting out on the curb, dirty. It was a slum area and it couldn't go any way but up."[8]

The African American community, which was largely excluded from the political process, had no opportunity to present its side of the story. Survivors, through their stories and photographs, contended that the city's gross characterization of the area belied its heterogeneity and overlooked its high level of functioning.

Arleen Ollie was nine when her family was forced out of Northeast in 1956. She is a star of "Street by Street," as a happy picture of her as a young girl beside her bicycle adorns the first page of the report. When I first met her, she explained that that picture had to have been taken at 4 P.M. because she had no socks on, and she was none too clean. Her father was fanatical that she be tidy, so her mother would wash her socks and tidy her up just before he came home. The comments about clean socks resonate with the efforts—hers included—to make clear that Northeast wasn't a dirty, nasty neighborhood. Certainly her thoughts remind us of Fred Mangus's justification for bulldozing the area: there were dirty children on the sidewalks.

Arleen Ollie insisted to my husband, Bob, and me, "I did not know anyone, even as an adult, that I would consider living in a shack . . . [one house] could use repairs, but it was not a shack. Everybody had flowers, I mean, the smells—I can still remember the smells of roses. And there was an open field next to the house, I don't even know if my parents owned that property or not, but we played over there. And it had blackberries and honeysuckle, and just a child's haven. We played war games, cowboys and Indians, Tarzan, swinging from the trees, just had a really good time."

"Knitted" was the word one observer used to describe the strength of the community,[9] and Arleen Ollie had a profound awareness of that strength. She described, ". . . a good, friendly, loving atmosphere in my neighborhood, because I had restriction. I could go to the corner on one end, to the streetlight on this end, to the backyard, and to the alley that separated the two streets. I could go *to* the alley. So I was really confined. But those people were really loving and

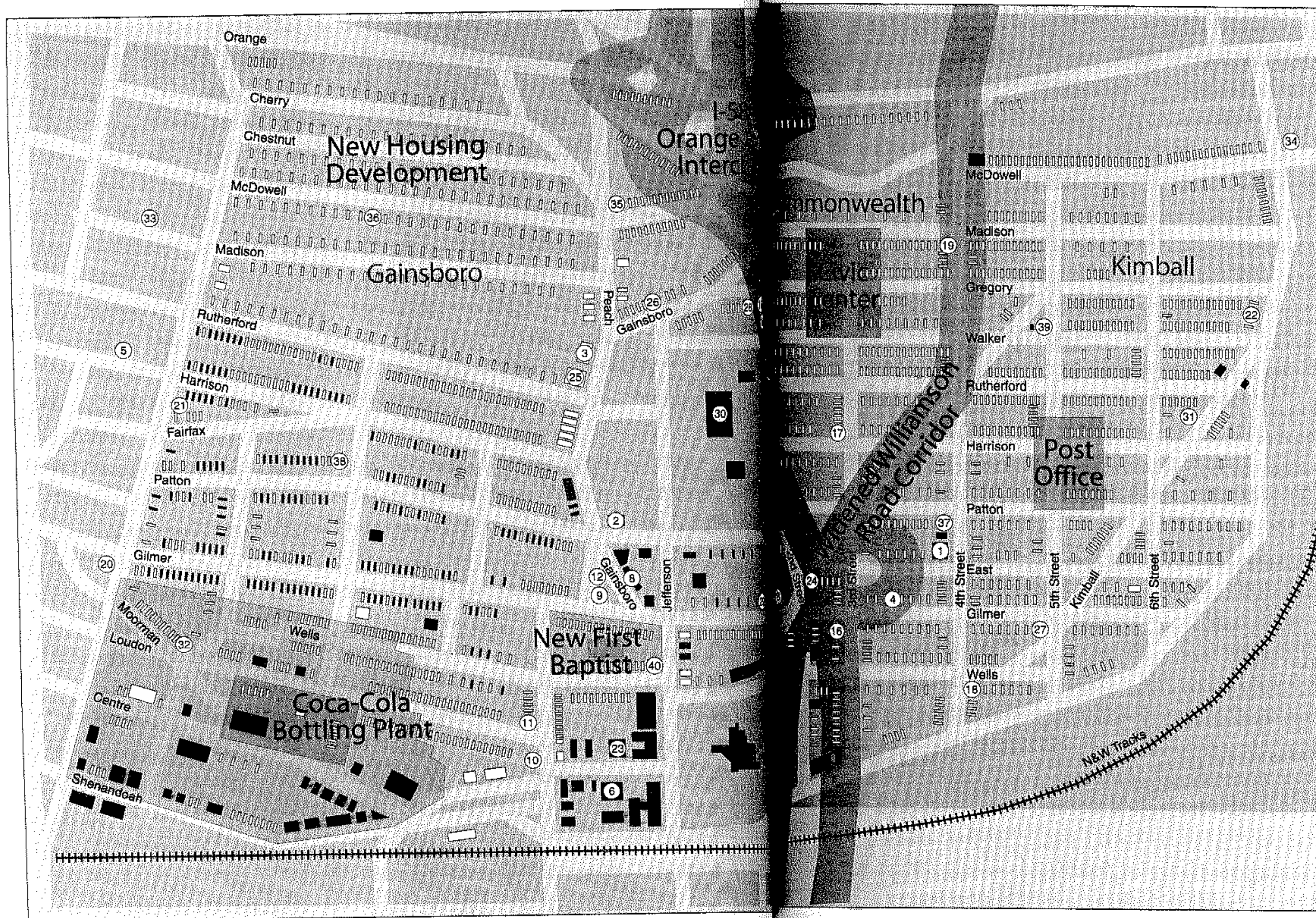



Fig. 4.1. Urban renewal in Roanoke. Adapted by Richard V. Miller from the original map created by Rob Lunsford, and published in Mary Bishop, "Street by Street, Block by Block," 1995. COURTESY OF THE *ROANOKE TIMES*.

□ Houses and other buildings destroyed by urban renewal.
■ Houses and other buildings standing in 1995.

**Directory of 1950 Landmarks**

1. Fire House Number 2
2. Gainsboro Public Library
3. Gainsboro School
4. Gilmer Avenue School
5. Harrison School
6. Allied Arts Building
7. American Legion Auditorium
8. Claytor Memorial Clinic
9. Cosmopolitan Building
10. Dumas Hotel
11. Palace Hotel
12. YMCA (Hunton Branch)
13. YWCA
14. Bible Way Church of Christ
15. Ninth Avenue Church of Chris
16. St. John's AME Zion Church
17. Glorious Church of God in Christ
18. Church of God in Christ
19. Mount Zion Baptist Church
20. St. Paul Memorial Methodist Church
21. Church of God
22. Pilgrim Baptist Church
23. High Street Baptist Church
24. Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses
25. Mount Zion AME Church
26. Iron Side Baptist Church
27. Mount Sinai Apostolic Church of God
28. Church of God and Saints in Christ
29. First Baptist Church
30. St. Andrews Catholic Church
31. United Holiness Church
32. Maple Street Baptist Church
33. Sweet Union Baptist Church
34. Central Baptist Church
35. Hill Street Baptist Church
36. Church of God in Christ
37. Morning Star Baptist Church
38. Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Chu
39. Christian Faith Band Sanctified Church
40. Ebenezer AME Church

caring and generous, and just good, decent, hardworking people. [They] varied; past the streetlight, where I couldn't go, there was a man who collected junk, and then there was a wealthy widow and a wealthier couple. They had hired him, the man on the other side. He was one of the first black postmen, and I don't know what he did but I think he worked for the railroad, and lived a couple of houses down. But two houses down from me on my side of the street, there was a couple who were really fantastic characters . . . They were drunks, they were winos, they did nothing. So, the whole street was really diverse and it was really close."

Arleen Ollie's experience after the destruction of the neighborhood was quite difficult. Just at the point of losing their home, her father also lost his job as a janitor. Desperate to pay for their new, and more expensive, home, Arleen's parents decided to work as live-in servants in Connecticut. Arleen Ollie and her brother, then four, were sent to stay with relatives. Thus began a long nomadic period, during which she attended ten schools in seven years. Returning to Roanoke in 1962, she felt that the closeness of the community had been lost, and it had not been regained when I met her.

"I don't think anything could happen here that would make [African Americans] work together," she told us.

I asked, "Is that a change?"

"Oh *yes*!" she replied. "I mean, think about it. Going from this really supportive, caring neighborhood—where if someone got sick, they didn't have to send out a message that 'I need some help'; people just automatically came and cleaned and cooked and brought meals and visited, took care of each other's children; there was no such thing as paying any babysitter, there was no such thing as having a child go out and do something they shouldn't be doing and no one knows he did it—to what we have now. How could a neighborhood make such a difference? The people I have lived in the same apartment house with for [the past] five years, I know who the people are mainly because I have seen them, and I have talked to everybody on that block except for one woman. But nobody talks to each other."

One of the serious problems faced by families affected by the earliest urban renewal projects was that of compensation. M. Caldwell Butler, grandson of one of the founders of the Women's Civic Betterment Club, who was then a young lawyer starting in practice, represented some of the families who were fighting for fair payments for their homes. Caldwell Butler got to know African Americans and their community at a time when few white people did so.

He told me, "I guess the thing that impressed me more than anything else was that these people were comfortable, happy in their houses. They were old houses, had been there for years. They were well situated, in that most of the people worked at the shops within walking distance, almost across the street. At that time a lot of the N&W Railway Shops were over there. So, it was convenient for them. They had lived there all their lives and raised their children.

"They were hardworking people, I think without exception at the time. They were all good citizens. But the thing that I reflect on, I was impressed with their character. I mean they were really honest, hardworking people, and they had a lot of dignity and class. And we worked on a very professional basis. They raised their families well and that sort of thing.

"I was struck by the unfairness of the whole thing, because of the substandard question. But those people, if they had had the same clout to get together and organize a project of this nature in cooperation with the housing authority, they would have taken better care of themselves if they wanted to sell, and that is just something that you couldn't do. But the housing authority did make good use of the property they took, from an economic standpoint. But from a social standpoint, it was horrible. These people were rounded up and spread all over town."

Lawsuits similar to that filed by Caldwell Butler were fought all over the country during that period. As a result, the compensation people received for their houses slowly increased. Moving expenses were factored in, and consideration was given to the costs faced by renters. Even though the basis for compensation was gradually extended, the payments continued to be linked to individual property rights. Collective assets—the social capital created by a long-standing community—were not considered in the assessment of property values.

Caldwell Butler, horrified as he was by past practice, thought that

market mechanisms offered a much better solution for change. "When you were coming here," he told me, "you saw that Lowes [building supply store] over there. Prior to its very recent construction it was a black community with nice housing on the fringes of Roanoke, going back more than a hundred years. When they came along to get that, they bought the land. [The homeowners] got fair prices and were able to move out gracefully, but probably all of them had to move. And, across the street as you come in here on your left, just before you get to the Wal-Mart, there is another black community that is larger and known as Southern Hills. And that was a less affluent neighborhood, but it is a stable people, and they are gradually being bought out by the real estate developers at market prices. The point I am trying to make is that urban renewal is a far more equitable process if the market controls the transaction instead of the government getting involved in it. So, I just wanted to get that off my chest."

It is important to note, before continuing the story, that Caldwell Butler was not unique among white people in Roanoke. James Robertson, a white union leader, shared with me his own experience with urban renewal. He was asked by city leaders to help convince people to move. His work in the union gave him credibility with other working people. But as he observed what the process of urban renewal was doing to the community, he became horrified by it. He withdrew from the process and made his story public, one courageous effort to stem the tide of destruction.[10]

Getting back to the Commonwealth story, I learned that people were told the project was intended to help them—that improvements would be made to the neighborhood from which they would benefit. This turned out to be completely untrue. The land cleared in that area was used for the highway, the civic center, and businesses. No housing of any kind was built on the land that was taken.

Willis Anderson, known to one and all as "Wick," was part of city government during the Commonwealth project. He spent an afternoon telling me about that period, as we sat on a porch by a noisy street on Washington and Lee University's otherwise quite peaceful campus. "Commonwealth," he explained, "was originally designed to be—the original intent was to tear down all the substandard housing and build new housing there for low- and moderate-income people. But a few things happened along the way to change that. First of all, the projection for Interstate 581—which as you know goes right through the heart of the city—581 from Orange Avenue to the river goes through what was the Commonwealth project, and before that of course was a residential area. It was mostly, you know, a low-income residential area. And so, then later it was—because the land was clear and available, that is where the Roanoke Civic Center was built. You know—the coliseum and the auditorium. So you have Interstate 581, the civic center, those two buildings, and the parking area, and that pretty well consumed the land that was part of the Commonwealth project.

"And then across Williamson Road where Magic City Ford is located, and the hotel and so forth, was the so-called Kimball project. And it was consistent with what urban renewal was about at the time. The idea was to clear substandard housing, slums they were usually called at the time, and then relocate the families to better housing. Some of the relocation was to be accomplished through public housing, and that is when the Redevelopment Authority started building the public housing developments."

It was Wick Anderson's opinion that most of the protest about urban renewal came from the landlords who were the owners of the "slum" properties. Mary Bishop thought otherwise. "There is a picture in 'Street by Street' of a whole black audience, listening to the housing authority director explain the Kimball project. This was after Commonwealth. And their faces are, their faces just tell such a story. Their faces kind of say, 'Oh no, not again. The Commonwealth was gone. They promised something that was not delivered, and he's saying it is not going to happen again but how can you know? What is going to happen to us now?' There were just furrowed lines in people's brows. They just looked stricken" (fig. 4.6).

### *Kimball, 1964*

The Kimball project, which started in 1964, was the next disruption for the African American community. Charles Meadows, who lived in Northeast for fifty of his ninety years, had much to say on the topic

of community. "In Northeast, there was no poverty because everybody helped one another. When we could afford two pounds of beans, our wives would cook them up and everybody would have a bowl. If our next-door neighbor didn't have a job, we would help them out. We were independently self-supporting as a neighborhood. We enjoyed it, because we knew we had someone to rely on. The section was so unified at one time, you could start at the Norfolk and Western station and call the names of everybody on every street. We didn't need telephones. You'd just walk out and call somebody's name, or spread the word. 'Hello, Brother John, hello, Sister So-and-So,' hollering on both sides of the street."[11]

Mr. Meadows was one of the people I talked with on my first visit to Roanoke. He was an austere man, made bitter by what had happened. He had had a wonderful house in Northeast and not only had he paid off the mortgage, but he had also invested in improvements. He had the house "to where he really liked it" when the city took it away. He was compensated for only a fraction of the worth of the house, and he had to take out a new mortgage when he moved to another section of Roanoke.

"I don't own this house," he said, gesturing at the solid and spacious room we sat in. "I'm just leasing it until the government comes to take it away." Part of his enduring sorrow was the loss of the tight community—the stroll of "howdys"—that he had found so supportive and pleasant. The neighborhood was knitted together by having an active street life. "We walked everywhere in Northeast. We walked to the market, downtown to the market. We walked to church, we walked—and every corner almost in the section had a little store on the end of it. So you met your neighbors, you could go there and you could talk until your meat burn up at home if you wanted to." This image made us all laugh. "You could stand out and talk," he continued, "so we just had better relations. We knew about 'em; if anybody was sick, you knew about it; anybody died, we knew about it; anybody went to jail, we knew about it; if anybody got into trouble, or if there was a secret, we knew about it." More laughter. "There was no secret there, everybody knew everybody's business. But we still had better relations."



He pointed to two factors that changed that way of life. One was the loss of old friendships. After being dispersed, people from the old neighborhood got together only at funerals. The second, and perhaps more subtle, change was an alteration in the street activity, related both to a slight increase in the distance between houses, and a marked increase in the use of cars, instead of feet, for transportation. No longer were people likely to walk down the street saying "Howdy" to the right and to the left.

Concretely, Mr. Meadows pointed out, "See that apartment across the street there. I think in the last year, about five different families have lived there. And you know, what few people that own their own homes and are in them, I don't know whether they stay in the house, or whether they work. Their houses look like they closed up. Every once in a while you see somebody pulling up in a car, or they might get in a car and leave, but you just don't see them."

Miss Dolly, Mr. Meadows's friend, added that, in addition to not knowing people, there was no longer a sense of safety. "Northeast, you didn't have to lock your doors, just shut your door and go in the house, go to bed, and go to sleep and leave the front door standing open, just the screen door shut. But here, well, you are not even safe in there with your doors locked."

There was deep disappointment in all that Mr. Meadows had to say, comparing what he had lost and what he had gotten in exchange. Most bitter was his disappointment in the system. The promises that the outcome of the Kimball project would be different from that of the Commonwealth project turned out to be hollow. The land was used for various enterprises, including a new post office. No housing was rebuilt in the area for former residents to return to their neighborhood.

*Gainsboro, 1968*

The total demolition of Northeast and Kimball was followed by the more piecemeal destruction of the Gainsboro neighborhood, which was called Northwest at the time. Gainsboro had such landmarks as Burrell Memorial Hospital, one of the best-known black hospitals in the South; Burrell Pharmacy, one of the first black pharmacies in

southwest Virginia; the Claytor Mansion, a twenty-two-room home that was one of Virginia's largest black homes; the Gainsboro library, organized in 1921 and one of the South's earliest black libraries; First Baptist Church, organized in 1867 and established in its brick building on North Jefferson Street in 1900; and Fifth Avenue Presbyterian's first 1898 church at 303 Patton Avenue, NW.[12]

The great center of Gainsboro was Henry Street and the surrounding area, called "the Yard." A person who spoke to Mary Bishop, but not for attribution, told her, "Henry Street has been glamorized. Henry Street was a street of hustlers. A lot of those places were fronts for gambling, bootlegging." He went on to list the crimes and violence that inhabited the street. "Just realize one thing: life was nice, but life was hard."

It was on Henry Street that Richard Chubb established his counseling business and remembered the bright lights that used to shine there. "Henry Street was a great street," according to Mr. Chubb. "Stores, clubs, *neon*."

On my second trip to Roanoke, I visited the office of the housing authority. Carefully boxed up and stored in their facility was an old neon sign that said DRUGS. It had been saved from an old pharmacy, destroyed as part of urban renewal, and it was waiting patiently for its next life.

I asked Zenobia Ferguson, who moved out in 1976, if she could tell me a little bit about life in the old neighborhood. "Four-oh-two Chestnut Avenue, Northwest. It was just a close-knit neighborhood. The neighbors were, okay, I'll give you an example. My daughter, and she is really my stepdaughter. My husband had her before we got married. I have a son and he has a daughter. But when she went to college she said that somebody took her bag with all of the clothing that she could wear at that time. And she called back home crying. My neighbors across the street started buying clothes for this girl, and gave them to me so I could take them down there to her. That is the kind of neighborhood I lived in. It was just, 'What can we do?' You know? And she wanted to come home, you know. She didn't want to stay at college, but I was determined that she was going to stay there."

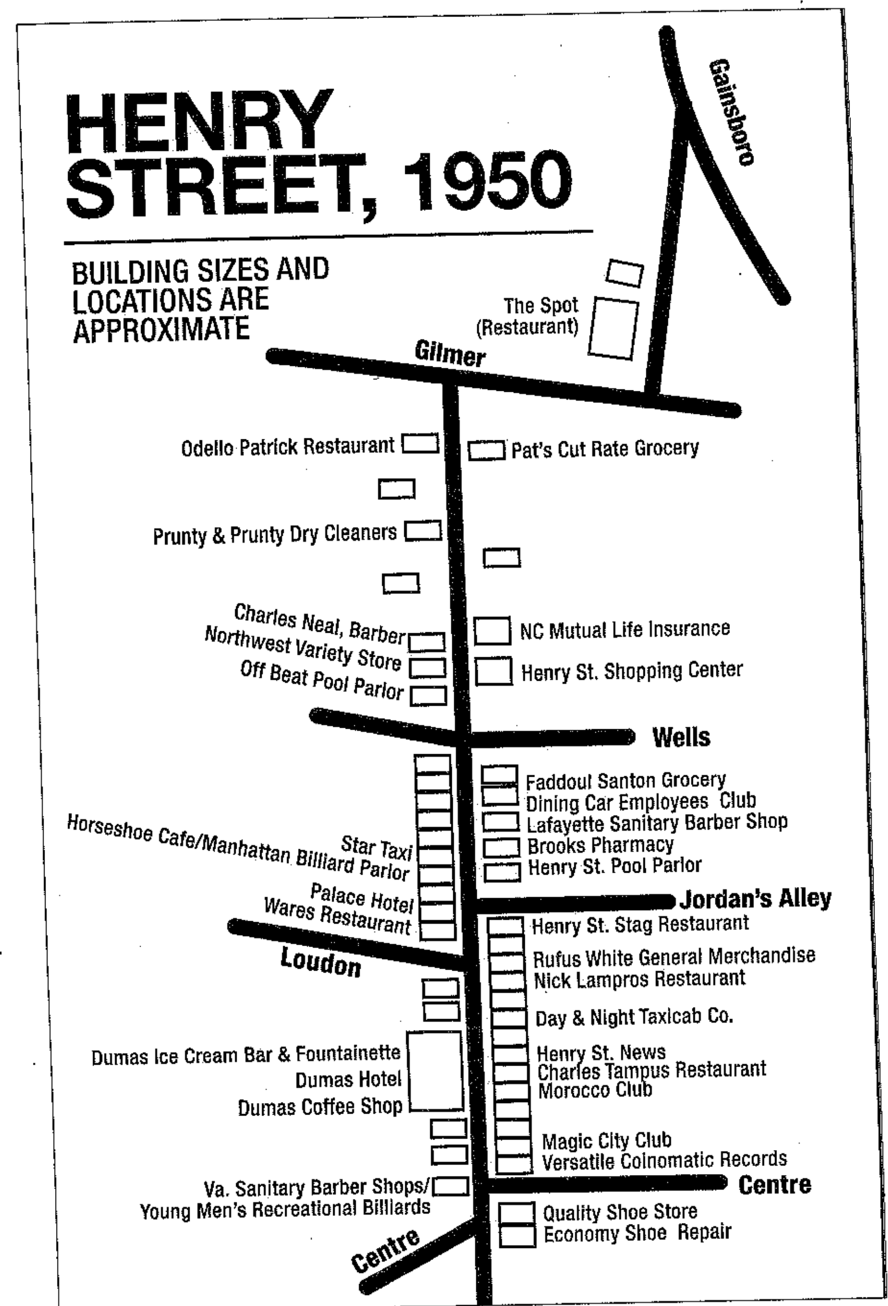



Fig. 4.2. The businesses on Henry Street. Adapted by Rich Brown from the original map created by Rob Lunsford, and published in Mary Bishop, "On Henry Street, Renewed Interest." COURTESY OF THE *ROANOKE TIMES*.

Loss of Homes Major Concern

# Kimball Worried as Renewal Project Nears

By BEN BEAGLE
Times Staff Writer

About 400 residents of the Kimball section—wondering what is going to happen to them if urban renewal comes to Northeast Roanoke—packed a meeting room and the hall at Gilmer School Wednesday night.

It was an initial meeting of residents with representatives of the Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority and almost all of the questioners asked: What if I don't get enough money for my house to buy another house?

R. R. Henley, the executive director of the redevelopment authority, told them the authority has learned a lot since the days of the controversial Commonwealth Redevelopment Project.

"From the experience of that, we know a whole lot more than we did before," Henley said. "We've gone a long way with this program."

"We do not intend to shove people out in the street," Henley said.

Henley said federal laws on aiding relocation of families in urban renewal projects have been liberalized since Commonwealth days and that they are [illegible] money is allowed in such cases and that this amount may be increased.

"I'd be out in the cold, wouldn't I?" the man said.

A woman wanted to know about the public housing project into which many of the relocated residents would move. She wanted to know if "it would be like Lincoln Terrace"—one of two such facilities already built—"with stone floors."

"It will be entirely different," Henley said. He said there would be plastered walls, "innovations in design," covered floors and the buildings would be multi-colored.

A federal grant of $1.7 million for construction of the Hurt Park housing project was announced Wednesday by U.S. Sen. A. Willis Robertson. The Hurt Project would be primarily for residents relocated as part of the Kimball redevelopment.

Some questioners wanted to know if they couldn't sell their property to commercial or industrial users now and get a better price.

Henley said the idea of urban renewal is to offer large tracts of land for such buyers. He said there is "no relationship whatsoever" in the purchase price for residential [illegible]

Henley (left) Answered Questions at Meeting Attended by Kimball Residents

Fig. 4.3. Photographer unknown. Parade on Gainsboro/Peach Road, circa 1939. COURTESY OF BOBBY SMITH.

Fig. 4.4. Photographer unknown. "Colored Division" of the Norfolk and Western Railway Veterans Association at its Convention at the Lincoln Theater (later the Morocco Club) on Henry Street in the late 1930s. COURTESY OF THE HISTORY MUSEUM AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WESTERN VIRGINIA.

Fig. 4.5. Photographer unknown. Church supper at Greater Mount Zion Baptist Church (#19 in fig. 4.1). COURTESY OF JUDITH MUSE.

Fig. 4.6. Photographer unknown. Worried faces in the news, March 3, 1966. COURTESY OF THE *ROANOKE TIMES*.

Zenobia Ferguson's daughter carried the hope of her family with her. As with many young people in a similar position, the difference between success and failure was the presence of caring adults. Joycelyn Elders, who served as surgeon general of the United States, related a similar story.[13] Dr. Elders arrived at Philander Smith College penniless and was told that there was no record that she had been awarded a scholarship. Wandering around in a daze, she happened to bump into Reverend M. Lafayette Harris, the ever-watchful president of the college. He asked what was the matter, and on learning of the crisis, immediately straightened matters out. A small intervention, but one that helped shape the history of the United States.

Zenobia Ferguson went on to tell me, "When Burrell Hospital was built, we were so proud. And then the Addison School was built. All those things made us so proud. We felt like we owned something. But then when the community was taken away, and we had to move away from it, it was just sad. It took that feeling of pride away from us." She was the only person in the six cities I have studied who told me that she had found a new community that resembled what she had had. Yet the loss rankled.

Urban renewal ate away at Gainsboro. A few areas were cleared for new uses, but most of the community went into a slow decline due to the impact of the "urban renewal area" designation. Planner Earl Reynolds, Jr., who had grown up in the neighborhood, told Mary Bishop that in applying that label, the government altered the value of the land. Banks stopped lending money, and people stopped investing in repairs and renovations to their homes. "It was just as effective as what we think of as redlining today."[14]

People were afraid to invest because they knew they would not get their money back when the government took their homes. One elderly man, Daniel Jones, complained at a city meeting, "This winter, I'm not aiming to buy that much coal. I ain't spending four or five hundred dollars putting in another furnace in that old house. I want to know what you going to do and when you going to come out and inspect and tell us when we got to move, and that you going to build a house for us. I want to know, because five or six years from now, I don't expect to be living. I'm just actually tired. Lord, I'm not complaining, but I'm just tired. I got an old termite-eat-up home. Take my home. I thought that was the idea."[15]

In areas of disinvestment, contagious housing destruction ensues. The process spreads through an area, with the destruction of a single home increasing the likelihood that those around it will also be destroyed. Fire is the principal mechanism for the destruction of homes in an area of contagious housing destruction. The wonderful Claytor Mansion was the most spectacular, but certainly not the only, victim it claimed over the years.[16] As fire burned out the area, the Claytor family's clinic became one of the only buildings left standing. Finally, it was impossible to use the clinic as a medical office, and soon thereafter, it, too, burned.

Just before my first visit to Roanoke, old First Baptist was lost to fire. On my first visit to Henry Street, the church's charred steeple still led the eye upward, but the sky was claimed by the shiny First Union tower just beyond.

Under the right circumstances, contagious housing destruction can destroy miles of urban habitat. It is easily stopped by effective fire service, garbage pickup, and building code enforcement, but, sadly, civic redlining—that is, the withdrawal of key municipal services—is a part of the redlining process.

As the infrastructure of homes and businesses was destroyed, the community fell apart. The remaining businesses failed, elderly people could no longer walk to the store, and institutions had no one left to serve. Zenobia Ferguson remembered, "It was left barren." The strain on people, especially the elderly, was enormous. "There were some people who got really ill," Mrs. Ferguson related. "They were going to meetings and the next thing, we were going to their funeral. I knew what the people had been through, people who worked from sunup to sundown, and maybe it didn't look like something to other people, but it was their life's blood."[17]

Despite the efforts of area residents, the repeated promises of city authorities, and the expenditure of a great deal of money, Gainsboro was devitalized, not revitalized, by urban renewal. In 1950, there were nine hundred homes, a dozen churches, and 165 small businesses in Gainsboro. In 1995, Mary Bishop concluded her landmark report by

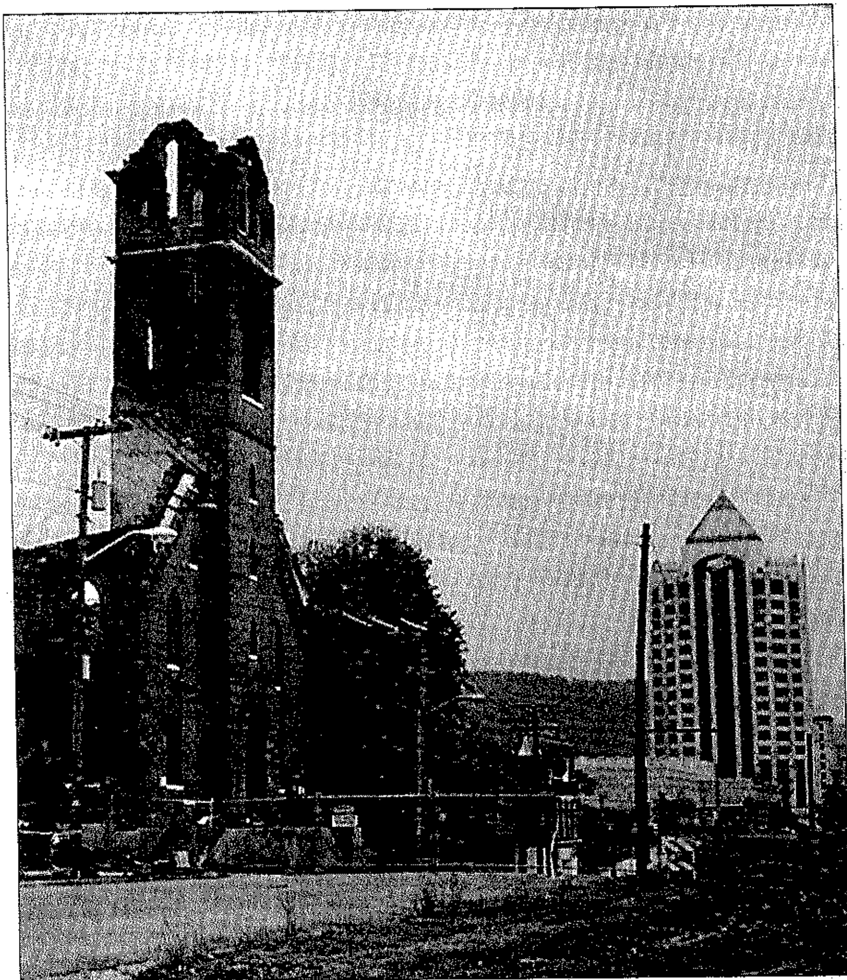


Fig. 4.7. Mindy Fullilove. First Baptist Church, after the fire in 1995.

saying, "Now, Gainsboro is a neighborhood of 190 old homes—many of them vacant—on a few streets and 79 small ranch-style homes and duplexes on redeveloped lots. There is one small office building, several industries, and acres of vacant, weedy lots, many that the housing authority says it can't give away."[18]

Just as the Commonwealth and Kimball projects had failed to deliver on promises on new housing, the Gainsboro project had not delivered on the bright future that had initially been painted. The denuding of the neighborhood left a vast, empty area that was ripe for



sale to the highest bidder for the most lucrative uses. All things considered, these were unlikely to include providing housing for poor African American people. Thus, the complete loss of Gainsboro as an African American center seemed to hang over the area as a fait accompli.

## A Drive Around Roanoke

On my second visit to Roanoke, in 2001, I stayed at a business travelers' hotel in a new mall on the outskirts of town near the airport. By contrast to the peaceful repose I'd experienced at Mary Bishop's home, the hotel seemed isolated and lonely, situated as it was in a sea of parking lots alongside I-581. As the only way to get around was by car, I rented one and made my way from interview to interview, with frequent stops in the downtown City Market for excellent coffee and out to Colonial Avenue to check email at Kinko's. Zipping up and down the streets and highways, I slowly got a sense of the city.

The City Market is a redevelopment of the historic center, its large brick buildings and splendid square creating a wonderful zone for eating and visiting. Reginald Shareef, a professor of political science at Radford University, described it as a great place to eat with the best jazz in town—the safest downtown in Virginia. I might add the area included a fine bookstore.

The strength and vitality of this area represent the side of the urban renewal picture that gave Wick Anderson so much pride. Part of downtown was made possible by what he described as the "Downtown East" urban renewal project, which he rated an unqualified success. That project took place in an area that was on the fringe of downtown and provided land that was used for what he considered to be significant development—including the Norfolk Southern Office Building, SunTrust Plaza, Trigon Blue Cross Blue Shield, and part of the land for the First Union Tower. "Now all of these," he remarked, "are very significant and important additions to the downtown business core. I am certain that most, if not all, of these buildings would have been built somewhere in the Roanoke Valley, but they would not have been built in the downtown business district without urban renewal."

The land for that project, a good deal of it vacant, he explained, was the site of commercial buildings, some of which were unoccupied. Because there was no disruption of a community, the harm of the project was minimal and the benefits maximal. The increasing densification of the downtown was being promoted by other projects in which Wick Anderson was engaged, at that point because of his role as the chairman of the housing authority. He described three projects, all close to the downtown area: one involving the renovation of a public housing complex, the second a conversion of an old office building to downtown, market-rate apartments, and third, the development of a biomedical park on "underused" commercial land. The emphasis in those projects was investment, all designed to strengthen and extend the functions of the central city area. They had in common that they avoided condemning the property of poor people in order to improve the viability of the city.

Gainsboro lies due north of the City Market, just across a footbridge that connects downtown to Hotel Roanoke. Though it hasn't happened yet, the redevelopment of the Henry Street area will happen soon and it will be critically important to the city, for many reasons. As argued by Reginald Shareef, it will determine the extent of African American social, economic, and political presence in downtown Roanoke. It will also be another point of choice between good and bad design. Good design would extend and strengthen downtown in a manner that could accelerate economic progress in the city by a huge margin.

Taking Williamson Road from the City Market, one tumbles out of the city landscape and into strip malls. This is the former Northeast, and it was in this area that Richard Chubb pointed bitterly to the sparse reuse of land, and said over and over again, "There used to be houses here, now there are only buildings." His phrase sums up a major critique of American urban renewal: that it stripped the downtown of residences and replaced people-friendly blocks and structures with megablocks and megabuildings surrounded by parking lots. In one area, overlapping with the Kimball project, he pointed out to us a post office, a Ford dealership, and a few other structures where a vibrant community once stood.



There is a massive visual and kinesthetic clash between the tight, vertical structure of downtown and the strip mall to the northeast of it. A few blocks farther, and the on-ramps to the highway appear. We are at the point where I-581 bisects Route 460, as unfortunate a use of the middle of a city as I have ever seen.

The area near downtown that was not given over to urban renewal is divided between run-down houses in the pathway of contagious housing destruction and brick housing projects that radiate despair. Mary Bishop worked with S. D. Harrington to produce a second special report, "The Invisible Inner City," which examines the plight of these neglected neighborhoods in minute detail.[19] They ring the urban renewal area, and their decline represents the playing out of contagious housing destruction, a predictable sequel to the clear-cutting of neighborhoods. The report emphasized the problems of abandonment and disinvestment that were causing the rapid decline in the housing stock. Fire had consumed many of the decrepit buildings, and the population of these troubled areas had fallen.

The area of the invisible inner city overlaps with the inner section of African American settlement, the second ghetto that had been pushed to the northwest from its origins in the center of town. By 2003, Roanoke was noted to be one of the most segregated cities in America, and many of the African Americans in Roanoke lived in the redlined zone Bishop and Harrington were describing.[20]

Actually one kind of investment is being made in the area: an investment in services for the needy. People who come to live here are likely to be poor and disabled. For them the area is affordable and convenient—located near public transportation and service providers of all kinds. In fact the area is so attractive to the poor that it draws people from a very wide radius who have nothing comparable in their own hometowns. This leaves Roanoke footing the bill for an inordinate number of troubled people. It also leaves the city facing an ongoing destructive process that will continue to undermine the stability of Roanoke's housing stock, spreading in concentric circles from the original point of damage, the Commonwealth project of 1955.

It only takes a few minutes to drive through the sad "invisible inner city" and to get to a neighborhood that represents "better"

Roanoke. Once there, however, the special grace of the city extends itself. A quiet kind of enchantment rewards the driver, each corner assembled with care, each street put together with consideration for individuality.

This, however, is all too short. At the edge of the city, malls and sprawl take over, replacing authentic charm with bright plastic, designed to last no longer than the first mortgage. It is clear that massive investment is taking place in that zone, supporting the same cookie-cutter developments that are going up near my home in New Jersey as well as in every other American community I've had the opportunity to visit. I am no longer in a special place, I am *where*? How do we name this ubiquitous entity we have installed everywhere in our country so that nowhere is away from home? At the end of such a circuit I am back in my hotel, dismal not because of age or dirt, but from disconnection with the beat of the city.

Roanoke, in 2001, resembled most other American cities, and was nearly identical to those that carried out urban renewal projects. Highways zipped through the center of town, cutting the whole in subunits. The core, outside of the vibrant historic district, was rather vacant, and surrounding that core was a ring of older, neglected neighborhoods that were slowly dying. Better Roanoke retained its intimacy and grace, but new Roanoke, which was springing up now at the edge of the city, sprawled into the new universe made for cars. The disconnections among the parts, the shocking transitions, and the clear intention of abandonment marked it not as a unified city, but as a process of leapfrogging investments.

Urban renewal in Roanoke hung on the thesis that the African American ghettos were grossly inferior to the beautiful neighborhoods. Midcentury civic improvement, those in power argued, depended on clearing out the slums and replacing them with new structures that would deepen the city's claim to civic beauty. What those in favor of urban renewal could quickly begin to claim was that tax revenues had multiplied as a result of putting the land to new uses. What no one could claim, driving around the rebuilt areas, is that they enhance or even meld with the historic charms of a sweet city. In fact, the ghetto areas were thoroughly in the mode of gracious Roanoke,



their replacements in the style of the strip mall. Roanoke's array of disassembled neighborhoods presents the quintessential issue in American city making.

## Assessing Urban Renewal

Wick Anderson, who was part of the power structure that carried out the urban renewal project, had, perhaps, the most positive assessment. He argued that the people who were displaced got to move to better neighborhoods. He said, "I think that many of the people thought, 'Yeah, I am glad to move because nobody else would have bought this place. And while I wish I got more money for it, I'd rather take my money and go buy a better house, and get a small mortgage, or whatever.' There were people who were glad to have an opportunity to move because they felt they were living in an undesirable neighborhood and they wanted something better for their children."

Thus, Wick stressed individual economic advantage in assessing the project. In that same vein, he applauded urban renewal for providing downtown land for the civic center and other enterprises that otherwise would have located on the outskirts of the city or in the suburbs. I asked him to name seven of his favorite places in Roanoke. In response, he spoke warmly on the solidification of downtown. "Some of the specific things that I am proudest of, and enjoy the most, and I think visitors and residents do, too, of course, are Farmers Market and Center in the Square, because Center in the Square includes a regional theater, we have an art museum, we have a science museum, a history museum, a planetarium, all under one roof. And then of course, just outside is the Farmers Market and all the shops and so forth. And lots of special events down there that draw people into town. So I guess that is my favorite part of the city.

"I am also very proud of the Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center. Now, that closed for several years. It was reopened after a very strenuous effort, and even a public fund-raising campaign. This sounds ridiculous to some people, but I gave a thousand dollars, which to me is a pretty big gift, you know, to a hotel that I don't have any ownership in? But it is owned now by the city and Virginia Tech. It is oper-

ated by Doubletree." And he continued, naming with pride many pieces that had been assembled to make the downtown a vital, interesting center, not just for the city but for the region.

Mary Bishop had a different summation of the evidence. "Out of my work, I have this image of a person and their connection to home, a wider kind of a home, not just a house to live in, but their surroundings. It's like in the pictures from *Gulliver's Travels,* where you might have lines from the individual. In my image, you would draw a line to the sun, or the way the children's laughter bounces off the schoolhouse wall, and the way the water runs through the neighborhood, the rain, the way the snow lies, and all of those things, being able to look through your porch nook and see your neighbor sitting out on her front porch. All of those things are very comforting to us, and we have not recognized the comfort we get from probably thousands of factors that are involved in that. It is just too big for us to see it.

"People are still so angry about it, and so hurt. To this day, there is an attempt to try to rebuild part of Gainsboro, and there are people who live there now, or used to live there, who are very divided over this. And while there are other factors that help to explain that division, urban renewal is a big culprit in that. There is that lack of trust. . . .

"One, the city just doesn't look the way it would. I mean, if that had not happened, we would have big trees, we would have big old homes, and churches and schools and things over there. We would have a much more pleasant entry into the city than a hot, dry, dusty interstate. They could have done beautiful things with all those neighborhoods. But nobody saw that. They just saw a slum. And it is where black people live. 'Who cares? It is cheaper land. Let's get it. They are not going to offer much resistance. They have no power.' "[21]

This point is dramatically illustrated in before-and-after aerial photographs of the urban renewal area.

"And white Roanoke has lost, too, and I don't know if people realize that. People brought pictures together for us at the family center, and we started looking through their scrapbooks at the houses that are now gone. We could see it in our own newspaper files and stories,

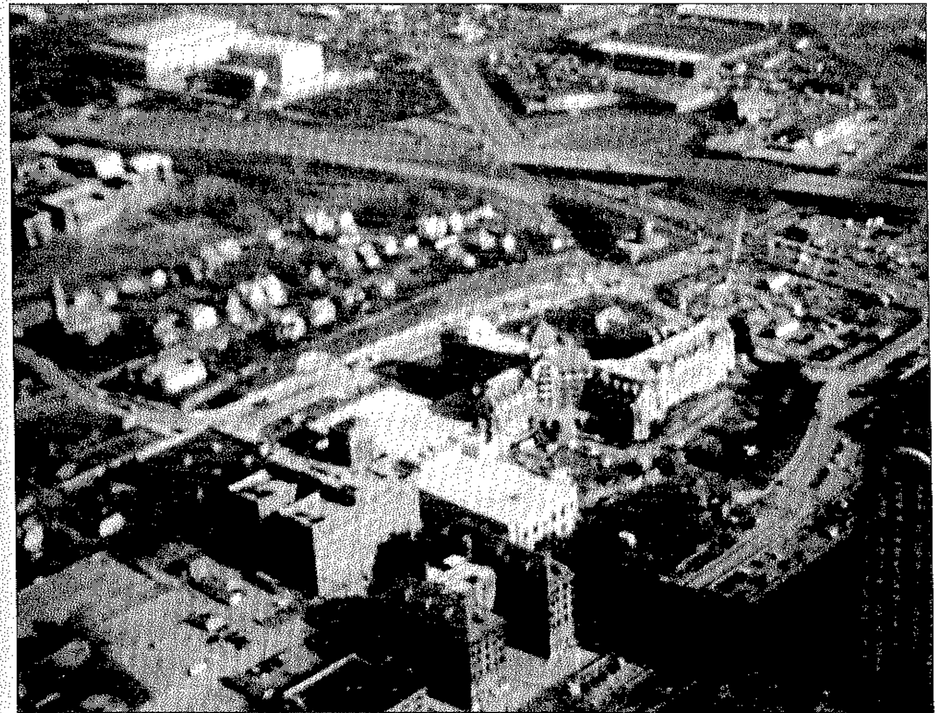


Fig. 4.9. The hollowing-out of Roanoke. Upper image: aerial photograph of Roanoke, 1944. Courtesy of the Norfolk Southern Collection, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Lower image: Wayne Deel. Aerial photograph of Roanoke, 1995. COURTESY OF THE *ROANOKE TIMES.*

the pictures that we got. We could see that mix of houses. We could see solid, big old wonderful houses, and then you see, right down the street—because every social class was packed in together, they couldn't go anywhere else—you would see smaller or larger, less well maintained places. Well, that all could have been done very nicely. Some houses did need to be replaced, I am sure. But they didn't have to take down the whole thing."

Reginald Shareef, who has conducted studies of the economic effects of urban renewal on African Americans in Roanoke,[22] helped me see the way in which these two different perspectives informed each other. "What happened here in Roanoke is typical of what happened in urban renewal programs that began in the 1950s and sixties throughout the country. What cities and municipalities wanted to do was to develop the inner or the core city, or redevelop it. And most of the development, or the people who lived around the core of the cities, were poor African American people. So, the public policy was that we were going to come in, rehab your neighborhood, put sidewalks in, improve your housing; if you didn't have toilets, we are going to do the sewer line. And so, the promise to improve the quality of life of people who had been disenfranchised historically.

"But the reality of urban renewal was that cities wanted to improve their tax base. And that is my interest. I have always looked at the intersections between public policy and economics. And what happened in Roanoke was neighborhoods were torn down so that commercial developers could develop properties and sell it to private interests. And the city won because it increased the tax base, and the private developers won, because of course, this was very lucrative.

"The only people who lost were the people who were promised a better quality of life. So, in Roanoke [at the City Market] that downtown area now is one of the most vibrant economic downtown areas, and across the railroad tracks you will see all of this development going on, in what was originally supposed to be an improved community. You see a lot of economic development. You see a Coca-Cola plant, and all of these type of things.

"But you don't see a vibrant black community anymore. Those people have been removed. So it gets back to what Moynihan said, I mean urban renewal is basically black removal—what he called in 1966 Negro removal.

"And that is just a brief overview. The long-term implications here have been just a deepening, deepening distrust and mistrust between the black community and the city government. Because government and government officials really pitted neighbor against neighbor during the 1960s and seventies."

These divisions had not dissipated over time, he noted, but rather had seeped into all aspects of political life, derailing African American economic opportunity in Roanoke in 2001. "My argument for the past nearly ten years is, when Henry Street gets developed—because there is no doubt it is going to be developed—who are going to be the entrepreneurs? Who is going to own the businesses? Who is going to own the clubs? Who is going to own the franchise restaurants? And the legacy of urban renewal has been, in my estimation, that the black community has so little trust of city administrators, that for the past five years there has been this ongoing battle not over so much about who is going to own anything, or who are going to be the businesspeople over there, but in airing grievances about past injustices."

As an outsider visiting Roanoke on a small number of occasions, I found it indisputable that African American neighborhoods were destroyed, and nothing like their old vitality re-created in the city. I know, as a psychiatrist, that, at the level of the individual, the loss of neighbors who "automatically came" was devastating. At the level of the community, the loss of the collective capacity to solve problems in order to make progress became a permanently crippling one. Social scientists have established that social loss of that order makes people vulnerable. After a loss, a second blow will hurt more and do its damage more quickly than the first, setting in motion an accelerating downward spiral of collapse.[23] Thus, for the displaced citizens, urban renewal sapped resources and depleted strength in a manner that increased the vulnerability of the uprooted not simply for a few years, but for many decades to come. Perhaps most problematic, at the level of the city, the dismantling of some poor, disenfranchised neighborhoods for the "greater good" pitted one section of the city against the

other, and unleashed divisions and hostilities that remain a heavy burden for the city to bear.

Arleen Ollie raised a series of questions she thought were, as yet, unanswered. "I don't think the adults ever talked about this to each other, because they were ashamed they couldn't protect their children. Maybe even that God let them down because they tore down all the churches. I just don't think they ever, ever, ever talked about it. In Mary's article someone made the anonymous statement, 'This is being romanticized. Northeast was just slums and I am glad it's torn down.' I don't believe that can really be many people's feelings, because if it were, then it wouldn't have had such a negative, isolating effect. Because, like I talked about, I couldn't get with the same friends. You know, I couldn't get up in the morning, after breakfast, and run down the street and play with these people. But the majority of them were within walking distance, but I guess the physical distance was more important than I had actually thought about.

"What I don't really understand is, what did the adults think? How did they feel? Because I know my mother used to talk to the woman who lived next door. My father, because he was quiet and didn't do a lot of talking, because he was always working, but I would imagine it would have affected the breadwinner of the family differently than their spouses. Did it cause a problem within their relationship, their marriages?

"I just feel like there is more to this. Because I really feel, generally speaking, blacks withhold their emotions, because even when I grew up, there were certain things you weren't supposed to tell. You know, certain things just stayed in the house. It didn't go outside the house. And then there were other things that could go outside the house but had to stay in the neighborhood. And then there were other, completely different facades that you had to have when you went around whites. So, there were all those different levels of intimacy. Well, not intimacy, but how did they connect or disconnect from being treated like they were bad children?"

These questions linger with me, waiting to be answered.

*In Their Own Words . . .*

# CHARLES MEADOWS

The following comments are taken from a 1995 conversation with Mr. Charles Meadows. My husband, Bob, and I had the honor of spending an hour at the lovely home of this senior member of the African American community of Roanoke. He was a great teacher, and spoke in a form of poetry, every phrase filled with wisdom and emotion. In order to convey the art of his speech, I have followed his phrasing in setting out this transcript of a portion of our conversation. He asked us why we had gathered, and I said that we wanted to know the connection between rising rates of disease and physical destruction of the black community. He joined me in wondering about this, as any Zen master might do.

## Mr. Meadows:

Well it—all—winds down to a very small note.
It seemed to me—, through the years,
and I've been here a good little while,
that when the black community got together,
or they were segregated,
they had to stay in one corner of a city.
There were boundary lines everywhere.
And—for some reason or another they stayed more healthier.
They—were more protective to the families in the neighborhood
and whatnot.

And to my idea,
I mean I'm tryin' to find an answer for your question, now as to the cause—
because we can't have a cure until we find a cause,
you know that.
The cause is because when they integrated,
and allowed the black people to go to their schools,
their hospitals and their different places,
they take on a different culture.
Now it might have been, they—
all these years they thought and they—believed
they lived in a better life of everything, the—other race of people.

Black people were just takin' the leavin's and the crumbs and the gravy
so as to say.

But somehow or another we—strive,
we like—children in—Daniel and the Hebrew boys and all that.
When we took away the meat, we didn't have the meat,
we strive on what we had and—stay healthy.
But now the great thing about it is that the lack of education,
the lack of preparation they had
that was one key that helped against the black
of givin' you jobs and employment.
If you don't have employment of some kind,
you—can't live, you can't survive.
They took away the dignity of manhood,
because when he couldn't support his family
then he didn't feel like he was a man in the neighborhood
or he dropped from the practice of culture.
Because in his mind he didn't see where he was worthwhile with nothin' to support hisself.

It brought about—too many projects and—
where maybe twenty years or thirty years ago,



we didn't have the best of homes to live in,
we lived in such as we had.

But it was home, and it was individual and it—was private.
When you took away everything
he—his livin' and condemned his employment,
there's nothin'—comin' in,
then he had to accept what they offered him,
this project business around here.

And I think when we got in that
it kind of screened 'em out,
that you've got a certain bunch of the same kind all together.
So from there on you begin to contact everything.

### Bob:

We were real interested in whether or not you saw that here in Roanoke. With the destruction of the neighborhoods—and the Northeast, whether or not when people moved they managed to stay together or whether or not they got all separated and started to fall into the patterns that you described. You were around then and saw what happened to a lot of the families; what do you think?

### Mr. Meadows:

Well I think it was an abuse,
and I think it was—
on the other—words
we didn't—
Black people didn't see,
and they didn't have—
the privilege to find out.

I saw a lot of misery, and a lot of sorrows.

You might say that you develop this area in here for a better
improvement.

No, no, it didn't do that.

What it did, it made us struggle harder—
to try to regain the footin' that we—
we were satisfied
in a four- or five-room house,
but give me a five- or six-room house
and I don't have nothin' to support it or to—go in it,
what good is it?

The—then I got to turn to somethin'.
In that case, you made it
you changed the minds of people.

In other words the thinking and the—dreams,
all of us have a dream,
and we—work towards that dream
and try to accomplish a certain purpose we make in our minds.

But when you kill the roots of that, what have you got?

Nothin'.

So we were damaged,
we had white lawyers here,
who black people went to to fight the courts to prohibit destroyin'
our neighborhood
and where we lived and so forth.
He knew what would happen,
but he still pretend he was fightin' the case,
he wasn't doin' anything for us. They—lost just the same,
they—paid him for—to—kill protection for 'em
and he just sold 'em down the river.
He collected the money and set it down what he wanted to do
right on.

### Bob:

Did they ever have hearings, or did they ever have any kind of trials
to force the city to rethink what it was doin', or—?

### Mr. Meadows:

They told lies,
if I might say it that way,
about that whole thing.
The—story they sold to the black people of—
the Northeast—
we got it goin' on now down in Gainsboro.
Those people been promised to have—
renovation and redevelop for twenty years down there.
They have 'em, they've died,
they've got too old.
They—just recently over—there—
I don't know whether you've been by,
whether you're acquainted with the city or not,
to know where the Hotel Roanoke is over there?

### Bob:

Yeah, yeah. Mary Bishop took us around this morning.

### Mr. Meadows:

Oh you seen Mary?
Well she, I rode with her for two or three years when she started
writing—

### Bob:

Yeah, she told us.

Mr. Meadows:

—and pointed out those things.
She should know.
But over there where the Hotel Roanoke is used to be—
Developments for blacks all over in there.

Now, in the recent year, or year and a half
they changin' the highway and bringin' it right through the section.
Those people asked for it,
and they cried
and out of that four or five of those have died struggling—
heartbreak, I would say,
or depressed because of—what they were losin'.

And every time they decide to do something,
why don't they do it,
why don't they bring highways through the South Roanoke over
there,
or—the Southwest area where white people live, and all the big—
they don't bring highways through that way.

They cut everything through the black section,
they can use it at any time.
And they hold meetings,
And they all have a big political talk,
"continued good things are gonna happen to you out of this
movement,
and this is progress."
And who—what the good things,
Who they gonna benefit?

And the black people out strugglin' again,
tryin' to find some way to survive.
You get out and
paint your house



and fix your home up
and build your house out here
and a couple years come through,
and they don't ask you no questions,
they tell you they comin' through there.

And—we probably have like—that thing with
they had maybe six or eight months of discussion
between the—officials downtown
and most time, as you know,
our ministers are the greatest fighters that we have
and we look to them for information
because we feel like they can get to it where we can't.

It hurts for them to bring information as to what we supposed
to do,
or what they know.

And then for somehow or another they get to them and quiet them
down.
You go and have a meetin' every six months
and the same progress,
the—movement goes right on.
And that's what I can't understand.

What is it,
what is about us,
what is a weakness about us
that we can never win none of those battles that break our hearts to
see done.

Our landmarks gone,
no description of what happened.
Nobody cares after they've accomplished their purpose.

Chapter 5

# WHEN THE CENTER FAILS . . .

I first met David Jenkins in 1994 at Housing Works, an organization providing services for homeless people living with HIV/AIDS. I was leading a focus group with agency clients. David's remarks fascinated me. He said he had lost his community at age eleven, due to urban renewal. But, he emphasized, "I've always been homeless." I was hooked.

David is tall—six-three—and very thin. He was born in 1947, a mixture of black, white, and Native American, and hence has a medium brown color, high cheekbones, and wavy hair. He is openly gay. He has never been married and has no children.

David is energetic and loud. When angry and feeling betrayed by the world, he rants about his misfortunes and the people who have done him wrong. When happy and at peace, he tells obscure jokes and laughs heartily at them. David doesn't walk into a room: he enters. He always has a lot to say, and will generally say it to anyone who will listen.

Saying hello to David can precipitate a discourse on the most intimate matters. He is a bit like a Venus's-flytrap: the unwary fall in, but



they can't get out. It can be painful to watch the faces of passersby who had planned to make some form of superficial conversation but weren't prepared for a detailed history of childhood sexual abuse. They attempt to edge away, to escape, but I have noticed that the sort of people who are most likely to make superficially polite remarks are also likely to make firm eye contact before uttering their trivialities. David's capture mechanism is eye contact. He doesn't look away or blink, and so they remain trapped, at least for the period of time dictated by their standards of cordiality.

Some people—though equally trapped by the eye contact trick—find the immersion pleasurable (obviously I am a member of that group). There was no more remarkable example of this than Jeff Becker, a musician and graduate student in social work and public health, who saw to the soul of David's musical talent in a manner I'd never witnessed before. In David's presence, Jeff was worshipful. In Jeff's presence, David quieted, focused, and showed his genius.

Over the years that I have known David, he has never been late, he has never canceled an appointment, and he has never wavered in his loyalty to me and to our project. I've lost count of the number of people who've drifted through my life since 1994, and so it was surprising to turn around one day and realize that David had become one of my "old friends." He was hospitalized briefly at one point, and I realized how much I had come to treasure his presence in my life and how sad I would be to lose him. Though he has been HIV positive since 1981, only after 2000 did the illness begin to take a toll on him. But with that decline, I have taken on new roles in his life, primarily that of literary executor, to make sure that his art lives on.

All of this came out of a conversation that started August 10, 1994, and took on a life of its own. On my side, I was not so much interested in piecing together a diagnosis—though there seemed to be lots of material for making one—as I was in understanding David's lifelong sense of homelessness, as well as his childhood displacement. Having just embarked on my effort to unravel the psychology of place, it seemed that David could help me see exactly how place fit into a person's psychology.

On his side was a need to understand all he'd been through. He

told me, at that first meeting, that he had gotten social security disability as a result of a back injury he suffered while living in California in 1989. This gave him money to live on, and, for the first time since age fifteen, he was free of the anxiety of supporting himself. He had decided that he should use the time to sort out the pain and confusion that seemed to dominate his days. "I have to think back on my life and try to understand what has happened to me. You know, when you are always worrying about where the next meal is coming from, you don't have time to think about the past."

It was in the spirit of self-discovery that he plunged into his life's story. "Really. Now let's start. That's a sort of homelessness. I didn't feel at home at home, where my brother and sisters, they were all older than me and I would go to the fields, I would go to the Tinicum Wildlife Preserve, and I would hang out with the game warden and would learn about the birds, you know, like, fragmites, there is that tall—bulrushes they call them but it's actually fragmites—that was the first thing I learned from George Lamb, I think he's with the Rockefeller Foundation now, but I was only like four or five years old then. I used to go out to the wildlife preserve and I remember the first bird, first time I saw an egret, he says—he was driving out and he had a dog named Cocoa and his wife was pregnant and George—his name is George Lamb—he says—he's—he had the city car started—and said, 'David, what's the name of that bird again.' I said, 'I forgot.' He says, 'Remember, the egret gets all wet.' " David laughed at the happy memory of that little ditty.

Over the years, I slowly learned enough to follow the several stories that got started in that paragraph: his dysfunctional family; his place of refuge, the wildlife preserve; and his childhood friendship with George Lamb, the game warden at the Tinicum Wildlife Preserve. David worked hard to help me understand. He spent many hours in conversation with me; he shared his poems, photographs, newspaper clippings, and memoir; he took me to see the important places in his life, like the single-room-occupancy hotel where he was living when I first met him; and he gathered friends and acquaintances for me to meet and interview.



This complex process was designed to help me, but it helped David as well. For example, when I gave him a copy of the transcript of our first conversation, he was quite upset by the realization that he had rambled from subject to subject. He began to make a conscious effort to stick to the subject. That made it much easier for me to understand him, but it also revealed the interesting fact that what had seemed to me like a severe thought disorder was, to a large extent, under his control.

I would not say that anything we did was therapy, but David would say that it helped him. It illustrates a principle in education: the best way to learn something is to teach it to others. By acting as my teacher, David was able to master his demons. This joint effort at dissecting place in David's biography occupied our time at monthly intervals from August 1994 to August 2001, when we agreed we had finished.

## The Scenes

### *Family*

David's family scene, so to speak, was quite intense. His main agenda in the fall of 1994 was to write a letter to his family confronting them with the abuse and neglect that had tormented his childhood. It was a blunt, angry letter filled with pages and pages of accusations. He raged as he talked about it, and each draft seemed to stir up more and more anger. I didn't think that it would improve family relationships, for who could face such a blast of condemnation? But David has survived by dint of his independence, and does what he thinks he should do. He believed in the letter. After months of work, he sent it off. No one responded—how could they?—but it was said, at last, and to David that meant a great deal. In the space of recovery that he was giving himself, it was time to speak of the horrors that had been visited upon him.

David's family consisted of his father, Gus, his mother, Alfonza, and eleven sisters and brothers. Gus Jenkins died when David was four, but as he often beat David, I don't think there was much ten-

derness in the relationship. David didn't speak of missing him. Alfonza suffered from depression and alcoholism. Whether these were present before her husband's death is unclear, but they were quite important problems afterward. Alfonza was extremely abusive to David, beating him with an extension cord, forcing him to do noxious chores, humiliating him often and publicly, and remaining ignorant of the ways in which he was being abused by others in and out of the household.

David's brothers and sisters understood him to be the family scapegoat and generally joined in belittling him. David, in his memoir, wrote, "Mother would say, 'David is bad.' 'You ain't never gonna be nothing, why can't you do like the other kids?' Brothers and sisters would say, 'Oh, that's David, always bringin home snakes and frogs and stuff, git dat stuff out of here.' 'That'—the word underscored by my sisters and brothers—meant the object farthest away from them, like, 'That's my brother, oh, that's David, just David he likes those "things." ' They used the word 'that' to indicate that they did not include me or welcome me as part of them."

The family's perception of David's sexuality was a part of their scorn for him. David wrote, "One day I was hit in the head by a Coke bottle and received stitches at Philadelphia General Hospital. I was crying. A sister-in-law living in the house, with some glee in her voice and laughing while ironing some clothes, said, 'You ain't nothin but a little girl.' Some time later, after we moved to the city, I heard one brother-in-law chuckling and saying to another brother-in-law, 'Oh, he ain't nothin but a faggot.' "

In addition to physical and psychological abuse, David endured sexual abuse at the hands of an older brother and other men from the local community. David wrote in his memoir, "I can count on two hands the few times that I've done sunshine, blotter or purple haze in my late twenties, but I cannot count the times I was raped from age four to twelve. It was practically every day and always the same persons or neighbors. I didn't understand it, no feeling for it, but did it, thinking that maybe this man loved me for doing that, even though I was told girls were for boys and when we grow up men married women just to have babies."



*The House*

The family house, at 8217 Botanic Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was not a home for David, and he noted, other families members may have felt similarly. They tended to say, "Meet me back at the house" rather than "Meet me at home." It was built high enough off the ground to be protected from floods that threatened the low-lying area when there were bad storms. The building was a large cube, divided in half. David's family lived in the north half, and their neighbor in the south half. On the back of the house was attached a "shed kitchen," complete with icebox, gas stove, sink, kitchen table, and window.

The large backyard had many parts and bordered on the equally interesting yards of neighbors. In one part of the yard, Gus Jenkins had built a cesspool. David remembered, "Boy, the smell of that in the summer, plus mosquitoes that would bite the hell out of you while breeding in the urinated water puddle on top of the ground. I never checked to see how many times each year the tank truck came to empty the cesspool." In another part of the yard there was the garbage can. This was, according to David, ". . . full of maggots at the bottom, so many maggots that if you shook the can (which I was always eager to do) it looked like a huge ball of moving rice!" Next to the garbage can was a vegetable garden, planted with okra, cabbage, collard greens, beets, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes. David noted, "I hated to go and pick tomatoes because of those humungus green worms with a big stinger on the tail."

*Tinicum Wildlife Preserve*

In my estimation, those green worms are the only one of nature's creatures that David didn't want to know better. His brothers and sisters were not wrong when they pointed out that David was always bringing things home. All through the years I've known him, David has always come back from Elmwood or Eastwick, the neighborhood bordering the preserve, with things—a turtle, tall grasses, whatever he could carry.

David spent many, many hours at the wildlife preserve, tutored by George Lamb and by the marsh itself. He waded in the waters, reveled in the tall grasses, and pined to adopt every animal he could stuff in his pockets. He played at the intersection of purity and pollution, with the freedom of country childhood within the borders of the city.

According to the display that I saw at the visitors' center of the John Heinz Wildlife Preserve—David had a great deal to say about the discarding of "Tinicum," which was the name of the local Native American tribe—the Tinicum marsh was steadily whittled away over the course of the twentieth century. In 1901, most of its original 5,700 acres were intact. Eastwick—what David calls Elmwood—occupied twenty blocks on its eastern edge.

Lying by the river at the edge of the city, it served for a brief period as a popular resort, but the push of railroads and highways, infill for farmland, and the advance of industry, changed the shape of the land dramatically. By the 1950s, when David was growing up, infill along the Delaware River had created a land bridge between the river and the wetlands. Eastwick had grown as a community. Approximately 1,660 acres remained. The Army Corps of Engineers pumped soil dredged from the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers into the marsh, which provided land for the municipal airport.

Changing land needs led to the Eastwick urban renewal project, cited as one of the largest in the nation. One small bit of the 2,500 acres that were to be cleared was David's neighborhood. At the same time, the encroachment on the wetlands continued, partly by the extension of the city and partly to provide land for the airport to grow. By 2000, when the Heinz Visitors' Center prepared its exhibit, it sadly informed visitors, "Today, only 450 of the original 5,700 acres of wetlands in Tinicum Marsh remain. Of these, 190 acres have been cut off from tidal flow."

*Elmwood Neighborhood*

By the time David was growing up, the resorts had left the land around the Tinicum Marsh, and noxious factories, such as an oil refinery and the Fells Naptha Soap Company, had taken their place. Black families, drawn by the availability of work others scorned, ar-

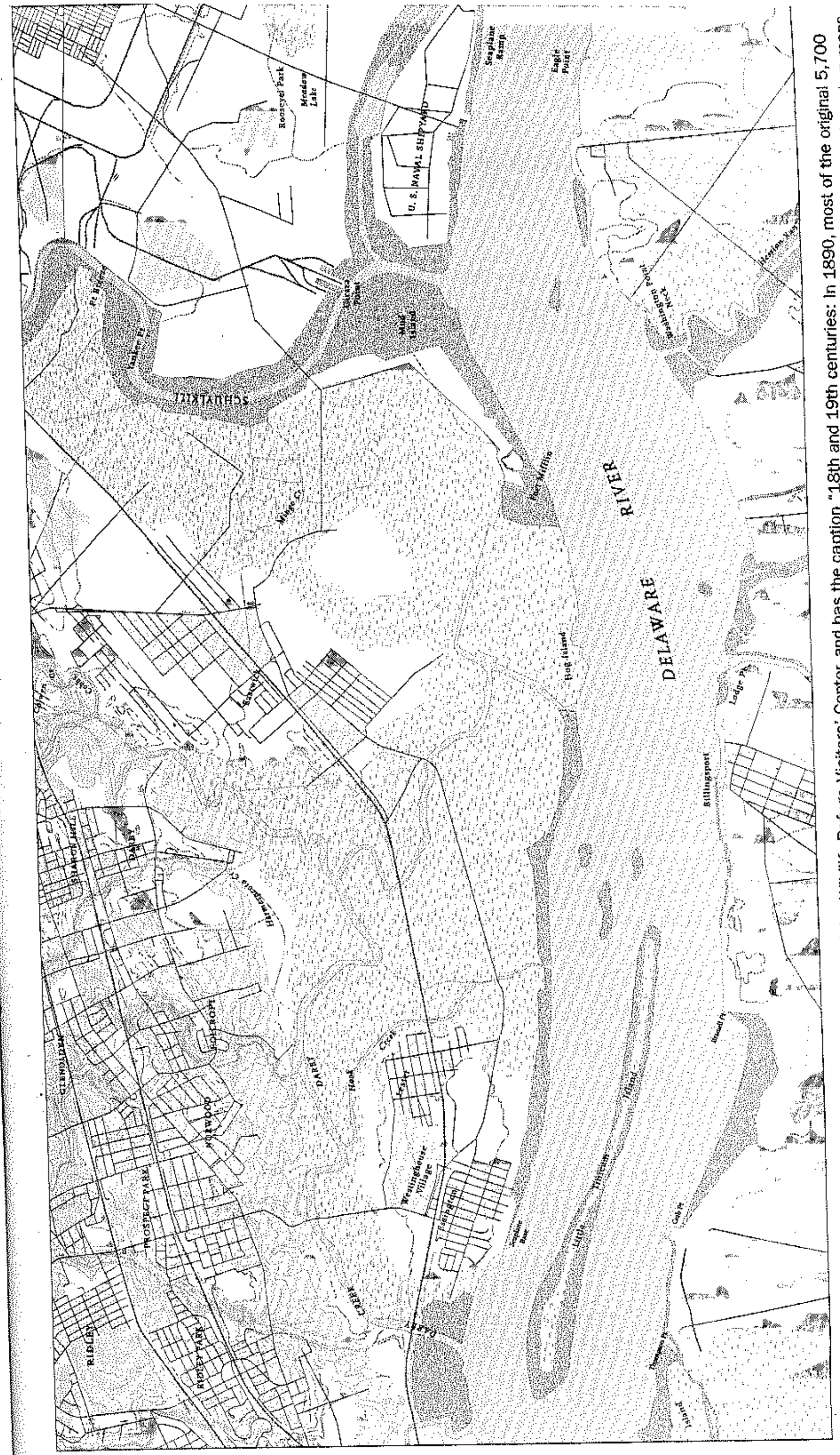



Fig. 5.1. Tinicum Marsh, 1901. This map is displayed at the John Heinz Wildlife Refuge Visitors' Center, and has the caption "18th and 19th centuries: In 1890, most of the original 5,700 acres of native wetland of Tinicum Marsh remained intact." Notice, also, the beginning of the neighborhood of Eastwick (also known as Elmwood). Created by Keith Helmatag, based on maps of the United States Geological Survey. REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF CHERMAYEFF AND GESIMAR, INC.

Fig. 5.2. Tinicum Marsh, 1942. At the John Heinz Wildlife Refuge Visitors' Center, this map has the caption, "By the 1950s, less than 1,660 acres of native wetlands remained in Tinicum." At that time, the Eastwick neighborhood was slated for destruction by one of the largest urban renewal efforts in the United States. Created by Keith Helmatag, based on maps of the United States Geological Survey. REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF CHERMAYEFF AND GESIMAR, INC.

ig. 5.3. Tinicum Marsh, 1997. At the John Heinz Wildlife Refuge Visitors' Center, this map has the caption, "Today, only 450 of the original 5,700 acres of wetlands in Tinicum Marsh remain. Of hese, 190 acres have been cut off from tidal flow." The Eastwick neighborhood is largely gone, replaced by the airport and its service areas. Created by Keith Helmatag, based on maps of the Jnited States Geological Survey. REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF CHERMAYEFF AND GESIMAR, INC.

rived during the Great Migration. They gradually built a small community of churchgoing, hardworking people. "We didn't have no radicals out there," Nathan Chapman, a leading citizen of the neighborhood, told me.

David's house was in the middle of the community, surrounded by kind neighbors with fabulous gardens. David knew the gardens intimately and went from gardener to gardener to ask for flowers for his teachers. Mrs. Johnson grew peonies and pink, red, dark velvet red, and yellow roses, while Mrs. Palmer had a one-of-a-kind hybrid snowball bush. "When that bush bloomed it was so full and lush she knew I would be over to ask for some to take to my Sunday school teacher or elementary school teachers. Mrs. Palmer also had some beautiful roses—pink, red, yellow, white, maroon, velvet—she would mix them with the white snowballs or just give me a separate bouquet of roses and warn me not to hurt my fingers on the thorns."

The neighborhood had its own social hierarchy. At the top were those who worked for the city of Philadelphia or the U.S. government. David commented, "That meant you got full benefits upon retiring and you had a big-time job." To describe the top of the Elmwood social register, David gave a detailed description of Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Chapman. "Mrs. Harriet L. Chapman was a brilliant and gifted organist, the best Elmwood had to offer, a stone-cold jewel if I ever saw one. She was tops in all the 'city part' of Philadelphia, as well. I could go on about her credits; that you can find out yourself by asking around town. As well as playing the world-famous John Wannamaker department store pipe organ for grand occasions and holidays, she worked there as a salesclerk. So you know being our church choir director, music teacher, and an Eastern Star past grand matron (sorry to say now deceased), indeed she was a blessing to anyone who heard her music while she lived. She taught me some things I'll never forget while others weren't paying attention. I've got her piano style right down to 'Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross,' her favorite song, or 'We've Come This Far by Faith.' Just ask me to play either and you will hear Mrs. Chapman in my fingers, dancing across the keyboard. She had faith in my musical ability."



David went on to shower an equal amount of praise on her husband. "Back at home, Mr. Chapman worked for the City of Philadelphia. He worked at the morgue. Anyone and everyone who died in Elmwood of natural causes or not had to pay a visit to 'Big Nate' before the mortician picked the body up. Mr. Chapman's job was important because he knew something about the person who died. He was a good source of information, boy, if he ever really talked! He is still living today, working in his church with the senior citizens and I believe a trustee and deacon at Elmwood Community Methodist, at Forty-sixth and Chester Avenue, and is also a Mason . . . So that's a shining example of how important a married couple like the Chapmans were to the Elmwood community and two of many people I admired and knew."

David's description of community life gives a fascinating glimpse into the overlapping networks that existed in a small black community. Though individual churches were the nucleus of life, organized exchanges of ministers and choirs and other forms of interchurch socializing made the churches, as a group, the bedrock of the larger community. David explained, "All black churches had different auxiliaries, such as the nurses unit, Willing Workers, pastor's aid, junior and senior ushers, trustee board, deacon board, deaconesses, junior choir, senior choir, young adult choir, and the gospel chorus (old folks). Then there were the Sunday school teachers. When any of these groups would celebrate an anniversary or the pastor would visit another church to speak (on the down low) outside of the pulpit, the congregation would talk among themselves before and after the service (most of the time over food afterwards) and exchange any information of what's been going on, with what or whom, politically or not, in Elmwood."

Everyone performed services for the church, and often people filled multiple roles. David commented, ". . . it was not uncommon for one person to be a member of a number of different auxiliaries in the church at the same time. It helped carry important information from one group to the next, sort of like a beehive." People often comment—as Arleen Ollie did—that in the old days they often re-

ceived help without even asking for it. The bee analogy is quite interesting, because bees' communication was quite enigmatic until the dance of the bees was decoded by Karl von Frisch. David offers a window onto the interactions that permitted nearly wordless communication among a tight-knit group of people.

There was much goodness to be had, and David knew enough to distinguish the good from the bad. He summed up his experience of Elmwood by saying, "Outside of being beat by my mother every chance she would get, or being molested by a male neighbor, or just outside my family period, Elmwood community life was beautiful." It is a complex thought, one that captures much of what David and I pondered over a long period of time. Vicious scapegoating in his family, and sexual abuse outside the family, left David's sense of intimacy twisted and stunted. By contrast, the unrestrained love within the tight circle of the neighborhood gave him a sense of optimism that has never deserted him. The enormous endowment of love he received from the neighborhood—"*everyone* tried to give me as much love as they could"—did not undo the curse put on him by his dysfunctional family. But it did create a buffer that prevented the abuse from becoming the entirety of his world. This buffer gave him reason to live while he healed as best he could. The story of Sleeping Beauty comes to mind, in thinking of this balance of curses: the good curse that can't undo the bad, but can create time for the Prince to come along and make things right again.

## The Loss of Elmwood

When David was eleven, the Elmwood neighborhood was condemned by urban renewal, under the aegis of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, and the land cleared for new uses. David and his household, which consisted of his mother, one brother, and one sister, moved to West Philadelphia, an area that was rapidly turning from white to black. The move was very difficult for David. In the early days, he would often run back to Elmwood and sit by his old house and cry. He missed the fields and the wildlife. One good aspect of the move, he noted in his memoir: "No more rape!"



Many neighbors from Elmwood settled in the area near David's family. They moved some of the churches. One, St. Paul AME, was still located in Elmwood in 2003.

"Near" is not the same, however, as "the way it was." People had to adjust to a much more urban life.

In my first interview with David in 1994, we had gone into this story in some detail. At the time, he sputtered with rage, as he recounted what had happened. "But you know the old folks, when we moved to the city, it didn't dawn on me—I was like twelve—and guess who so-and-so, Miss so-and-so died. So all the churches that was out there, they had to move and everything was all spread out, our whole community was ruined. The old folks, every week there would be three and four funerals a week, at all, People's Baptist Church, at our church was Beulah, New Hope, Calvary Baptist church, all the churches that were out there, the only church that didn't have to move was the Catholic church, the white church right there on Tinicum Avenue . . ."

David was getting quite agitated. I asked him if he was always this agitated or if thinking of the past still made him sad and angry. He replied, "Yeah, angry is the word. There is this, it's just like, there's so much that I could have done, if I knew then . . . what I know now. Them white folks at the development authority, I would have kicked their tired asses right back into the city, 'cause they wouldn't have took that property, not from my community, but see, those black people didn't know any better. They couldn't do anything, their hands were tied, they didn't have no city, they didn't have no pull. [So] they died. They couldn't handle it."

### *The Undoing of Kindness*

Urban ghettos were vilified as places of shame and dysfunction. Though filled with the poor, though incorporating red-light districts, though inhabited by con men and robbers, residents taught me that those neighborhoods were places where people shared with one another. People had in common experiences of migration from the South. People had in common the pressures of daily life. People had in common the struggle to survive in the face of racism. And though

such pressures might turn people against one another, in those places it made for a great deal of kindness.

The kindness had multiple sources. One source was the church, and particularly the churches imported from the South, which had a history of being the kindly bulwark against oppression. Those churches sponsored youth achievement, permitted adults to relax, and provided the sustenance that made weekly life possible. The community-building of the church—feeding the congregation, caring for the sick, watching over the children—bled into the community-building of the neighborhood. The church women became the tireless workers of the political organizations, the parent-teacher associations, and the unions. They brought to those tasks not simply the motivation to be kind, but, of equal importance, training in the acts of kindness.

But there were other sources of kindness. The gardeners, who planted crops in small backyards, had produce to share. The men of many professions who managed the streets minded the wild children, to limit as much as possible their descent into harm. The musicians and dancers and athletes gave content to consciousness: ideas to think about and access to the tools of creation. My father, who traveled a great deal in the late 1940s and early 1950s, described arriving in a new town, going up to another black man and saying, "Where's the ghetto so I can get a taste?" Inherent in his question are the assumptions of the urban ghetto: its existence, its salience to a random black man, its bar, and the common "taste." In the currency of the ghetto, a bottle of whiskey was an offering of kindness, in much the same way as a hot meal.

Kindness worked through the collective as both buffer and glue. It was a force for tolerance and respect: it was not a guard-all shield. Kindness did not stop child molesting, it did not stop wife beating, it did not prevent children from torturing each other, it did not prevent unemployment. It did ooze into the interstices to ease the pain of all these things. David Jenkins, though abused by many, was kept afloat by the kindness of neighbors. "Mrs. Sloan was an excellent cook, and if I was at her house at dinnertime she would say, 'David, pull up a chair and eat with us.' She knew that I would get in trouble with my mother, so she would call my house and say, 'Alfonza, David's going to



eat with us. I'll send him home right after dinner.' I loved her cooking, and then I wouldn't be hungry." David still laughs about his childhood cleverness at cadging a hot meal out of a kindly neighbor. Yet who doubts that she knew exactly what he was doing and what she was doing, as well?

Kindness declined after the rupture of community. Arleen Ollie of Roanoke noted that, when she graduated from college in 1995, no one was glad for her. In the old days her Roanoke neighborhood would have celebrated what she'd accomplished.

What happened to the kindness? Why wasn't it re-created?

Certainly, after urban renewal, individuals remained kind, and organizations continued to nurture rituals of concern. The field of dispersion, however, appears to have altered substantially. In the compact space of the ghetto, a tight field of activity was created, through which acts and words might pass quickly. It was possible to know of someone's pain or glory, and to respond as needed. Actions toward others were permitted and expected. They were extended with the consent of the community, and received in that same vein. This passage through the field of the community, with the consent of the community, meant that the sense of kindness was everywhere, at least within the community.

The shattering of the field, which is a principal outcome of urban renewal, had an enormous effect on kindness because kindness was passed through the field. In the aftermath of urban renewal, individuals were preoccupied with making a new life, and perhaps they could not be as kind as they had been previously. At the same time, given the loss of the field, the kindness did not extend as far as it had before. The buffering effect of the kindness was lost, and the negative behaviors and attitudes that had always been present were given greater scope. Given the other difficulties that were to come, the decline in kindness, however small, triggered a downward trend in kindness over the ensuing decades.

The stories take us in several directions. Arleen Ollie's family moved to a nearby neighborhood that had previously been all white. They bought a house next door to a white family. On the day they moved in, the wife died. Arlene's mother went to pay her respects and

ask if there was anything she could do to help: she was, in other words, being kind. The husband said that her help wasn't needed and closed the door in her face. His refusal to let her be kind was an act of prohibition that prevented the field of kindness from being reestablished in a new place. For people who moved to previously white neighborhoods, such experiences were not rare.

In the projects, the experience was different. Sala Udin of Pittsburgh remembered many lessons in neighboring that accompanied moving to the Bedford Dwellings housing project. All of the families in that project shared responsibility for the common spaces. Families took turns cleaning up the garbage room and the laundry room. If a family was careless in its duties to others, its members would be censured by the other families, as well as charged a fine.

Yet the intensification of bonds within the projects did not necessarily bode well for the surrounding neighborhood. Pittsburgh projects, like those in other places, were designed to create an interiority of the housing development and a break with the surrounding area. Hence, the field of kindness was limited by physical barriers that marked the project as a unique entity within the neighborhood. Because of this interiority, when the kindness in the projects collapsed, the decline was rapid and bitter, with meanness consuming the net of relations.

Smaller institutions—notably the church and the family—sustained kindness within themselves. But as kindness was no longer the same kind of universal language or value, divergent paths appeared. The celebration of meanness that appeared in gangsta rap in the 1990s grew out of the decline in kindness that appeared in the aftermath of urban renewal. David's life, when I met him, was lived in that field of meanness.

*Hell Hotel*

In September 1994, David invited me to visit him at the single-room-occupancy hotel where he was living in New York City. Such hotels had been set up for homeless people, as a temporary solution to their housing problems. Because people lived in a single room, without a kitchen and often without a private bathroom, occupants of these places were still considered "homeless" in acknowledgment of the fact that they had moved off the street but not into a real home.

Hell Hotel was built as a monastery, and the rooms were small, with thick, solid walls. Residents were usually sitting on the stoop when I arrived, a motley, disheveled bunch of people, drinking beer and being loud to pass the time. The same kind of behaviors obtained on the inside. It was years before David knew me well enough to share the details of the drug dealing and drug using that went on there, though it was obvious from the beginning that the residents were inches away from catastrophe. People I met mostly drifted back to the streets and to more active levels of drug taking. David was emphatic that that was not going to be his fate.

I proposed to David that, while waiting for better housing, he try to make himself feel at home there. I'm quite sure that, had I really understood the roses and the turtles of Elmwood, I would never have so blithely suggested Hell Hotel could work on any level. But David took my advice to heart, and immediately began to search the streets for the materials for the transformation. As he was living in the Garment District, fabric was easy to come by. So were light fixtures. Soon, he had created a curtain that divided the cell into three areas, a foyer, bedroom and living room. I had never seen anything quite like that before: the creation of space where there was no space. He draped the light fixtures with gauze, and taped photographs from his professional life on the walls. He had produced a homey-looking place. It was a long time, though, before he decided he was "home," and home certainly wasn't Hell Hotel.

*Visit to Elmwood*

In the spring of 1995, David took me to visit Elmwood. Though there was no community left, we would see what there was to see. I was supposed to speak at a conference in Philadelphia, so the plan was that David would go down with me. I woke up at 4:52 that morning, jerked out of sleep by the alarm clock. It was raining fitfully, and I thought for an instant I wouldn't have to go. But David was not worried about the rain. We took the 7:15 train, and I slept most of the way, largely to escape the incessant chatter of my companion. We

walked from Thirtieth Street Station to Reading Terminal Market. David was flooded with memories almost from the beginning. He bought a soft pretzel from the first newsstand we passed. As we walked farther down the street, he began to wonder who he would see that he would recognize. "David—David Jenkins? How you've grown!" he joked.

At city hall he pointed out where his mother would leave him while she went off to buy liquor. Around the corner was the spot of an interracial gay bar, the Ritz. "In those days people dressed up—shirt and tie and it was very closeted." At the Reading Market he searched for a special stand with Lebanon bologna, but it wasn't open that day. We ended up buying sandwiches at a hoagie stand, and David regaled the saleswoman with stories of how hoagies were made in other parts of the country. On the way up to Philadelphia Community College, where I was to give my talk, we passed more spots of importance—his old art school and the hospital where he was registered (but not born). He was pleased with my speech and had good comments to make. He gathered up literature to give to people who needed it, and we set out for Elmwood. This involved the subway and a trolley, which took us through badly deteriorated neighborhoods. At the last stop of the trolley, we got off and followed a young man under the highway, through a railroad fence, and up to a roadway. We later saw the young man washing car windows on a corner.

We walked to David's neighborhood. It was hot and humid. The rain had stopped and it was a beautiful June afternoon. The air was filled with wonderful smells, dominated by honeysuckle and underpinned by the fetid marsh aroma floating in from Tinicum. White fluff, which David identified as cottonwood blossoms, floated through the air. We came to a wonderful complex of gardens. One—which David said was built on "the little field"—was being tended by an Italian man and his wife. We stopped to chat with them and he posed for a picture. He had been a peasant, in the United States since 1966, and spoke English with a thick accent. His tomato plants were a marvel. David was angry, though, and wanted to get away. "That's my father's land," he muttered to me.



We continued our walk through an area that was part woods, part fields. We came to an old house and a small, old woman who demanded to know our business. David explained who we were. She said who she was—Delores Rubillo—and David realized she was a former neighbor. He exclaimed, "You're still here!"

"That's obvious," she snorted.

It was, I thought, an extraordinary moment for him and one that deepened his sense of the futility of his loss. She had, as he wished *he* had, battled for the land and won. She had the whole neighborhood in a deed of trust, and nothing would be developed in her lifetime. She scoffed at the people who had taken the $5,000 and left—they had no principles, no moral fiber. She explained she was a harpist and had stayed in grand hotels all around the world. "But there's no place like home."

She waxed poetic when I asked her what "home" meant. "People know, you know where you are—" and leaning in to me added, "you are safe in the dark." I really liked that image.

She shared her memories of what Elmwood had been like, a rare interracial community in which everyone got along. "If a kid got in trouble, you'd tell his mother and he'd get a beating." David liked that, as it was a point I'd made in my speech. We talked for a while, standing there in the semiforest around her home, and then we continued our walk.

The most dramatic moment of our trip was arriving at the spot where David's house had been. It was a simple field. The larger trees had been there in his youth and he was shocked by the girth they had attained. David plunged into the undergrowth, quite absorbed in the effort to find signs of the past. "It would be easier in winter," he commented, "so I will have to come back."

He was suddenly upset. "You have to take me back now."

I convinced him that we should see the rest, so we walked a little farther, past where the school had been, where the churches had been, where there was nothing but fields and trees, a gentle breeze and the hum of a highway. At one point we stopped and he said, "This is where we graduated. It was a day like this."

I was flooded with thoughts of June, of hot days when you long to get out of school, of June afternoons when mothers are starting to make dinner, and kids are playing in the welcome heat. All around us birds were singing, and I basked in an utterly pastoral peace.

It was the kind of knowledge that lets you measure loss.

As we walked back, David related old nightmares he used to have of being run over by the trolley.

*The Times Square*

In the fall of 1995, David succeeded in moving to the Times Square, a highly regarded, supportive housing development on Forty-third Street, near Eighth Avenue. Gilded and shiny, the pretensions of its grand lobby struck me as more ominous then the rowdies on the steps of Hell Hotel. I worried, too, about its size. In my view, the Times Square had at least as much pathology per square inch as Hell Hotel could boast, but ever so many more inches. I worried for David that he had put himself in a worse position by trading up. David, however, was thrilled. He had a wonderful room, looking south over midtown, and he moved in happily.

It turned out that there was some truth to my fears. The horror of the Times Square was not at all like that of Hell Hotel. Where David's old place had been openly brutal, in the new hotel things happened silently. People died in their rooms and were discovered days later, or fell off the roof, no one knew how. It was spooky in its horror. To add insult to injury, the Disneyfication of Times Square started soon after David arrived, adding jackhammers and construction dust to the other indignities of the place.

Where David could post a bold poem on his door at the Hell Hotel, it was harder to keep the ghosts out in his new place. His use of drugs and alcohol went up, until residential treatment was required for him to get stable again. His T-cell count started to fall, and his viral load started to rise. Illness followed.

In sad pictures there are always bright spots. One such was Cary Medwin, a social worker who happened to be a feng shui adviser as well. She was one of those intrigued by David. She offered a feng shui consultation, and helped him reorganize his room. It made such a

Fig. 5.4. David Jenkins in 2002.

change in David that I immediately asked if she could help me. Karen Furth, a photographer who worked at the Times Square, became a good friend and supplied David with cameras he used to document the transformation of Times Square from the unique perspective of his fourteenth-floor home. David always seemed to be working to get his career going, and his house/home in order.

*Healing*

Healing is a peculiar process because it is hard to say what it is that makes us feel better, or why it happens when it does. Through a period of slow deterioration in his health, David actually began to heal some of the psychic pain he had carried for so long. This became most evident in 2000, around two events: a family reunion and the death of his mother.

The family reunion was the first event. A large group of people—David's therapist, his probation officer, his spiritual adviser, his support group—worried that David would go to Philadelphia and disrupt the family reunion. David shared their concern. But, as it turned out, he

was able to manage it. He was relieved to be able to be there in an appropriate manner. And his description of the event demonstrates a marked shift from the disjointed, agitated manner in which he expressed himself in 1994.

He told me, "[Friends] were concerned about what I might do, including my probation officer, if I go down to Philadelphia to this family reunion. That I don't turn it out. I mean actually, literally and figuratively, tell those people what a piece of my mind is about or get in a fight, but they worked with me, and some of them prayed with me, and other people put me on their altar, and my support group—and I got there and handled everything. I saw it a different way, like I was supposed to see it . . ."

Not only did he not turn it out, he stood up and made a wonderful toast honoring the three family matriarchs who were present.

Shortly thereafter, he was tested again. He was called by his sister to come immediately to Philadelphia, as his mother was dying. Again, his story was clear, and the emergence of balance and calm remarkable.

The call came, as such calls usually do, at the tail end of a busy day. David borrowed money for the trip from the hotel's petty cash. The bus was late leaving Port Authority, so David did not get to Philadelphia until 10:25 that night. He told me, "I rushed to the nursing home. Nobody was there. I got in, signed in, went upstairs, and nobody was there. Mind you, I haven't eaten all day, and I'm flying! I get in my mother's room and—this is at Haverford Avenue over in West Philly, St. Ignacious Nursing Home—and I just know they would all be waiting for me, to have that last prayer—Mindy! The last prayer with your mother! Darling! Those Negroes left me! And they went home! No one waited till I got there, or to see if I was all right. What this book is about is the dysfunctional family? I see now. This is really terrible.

"So I just stayed there . . . I just went to my mother, and I told her, and I whispered in her ear. I said, 'Go to the light, go to the light.' I said, 'Mother, this is David, go to the light.' "

A nurse came in and asked if he was David. David asked her how she knew, and the nurse replied that his mother had been calling his name constantly. David was awed by this. He continued to tell his mother to go to the light. "I said, 'Girl,' I said, 'Listen: GO TO THE LIGHT! Get up out of here!' I said, 'Mother, listen. You're finished here, your time is up, now is the time for you to rest. That's all you have to do is rest. So go to that white light, and walk in it, and you'll be happy for the rest of your life, cuz you're finished. I'm all right, this is David. I'm doing real fine here. I've got a book coming out and you've got to help me with it when you get on the other side. You got to turn everything around on these people,' I said. 'But go to the white light.' "



David spent the night at his cousin Barbara's house, and enjoyed talking to her and to her sister about the family and its issues. On returning to the city, David learned that his mother had died just as he left. In a sudden shift, he felt loved by her, and most proud that he could guide her in her last moments.

David and I didn't get back to Elmwood until March 2001. Marian Banzhaf, a Revson fellow working with me to understand David's story, accompanied us. We drove down first thing in the morning to meet with Nathan Chapman, "Big Nate," and his daughter, Zara. We had a long conversation with them, and learned a lot about the Elmwood community. Mr. Chapman's memories confirmed David's, but from an adult perspective. The community he described was much larger than the community that remained in David's mind, perhaps on the order of ten thousand people. Mr. Chapman had a detailed map of the community in his head, and would often refer to places by including their cross streets.

We explored the industrial nature of the community, and the large number of polluting plants in the area. Fifty years ago no one worried about that. More recently the community had become concerned about exposure to cancer-causing agents. After lunch, Mr. Chapman took us out to see a section of the community that still existed, as well as St. Paul AME Church, which had never moved.

After we said good-bye to our host, we set out in search of David's house. As we drove down the street, we were shocked to see a parking lot on one side, and a large Hertz rental car location on the other. We got out and walked around, trying to digest what had happened. We

tried to locate Mrs. Rubillo's house, but there was no way to access the place where we thought we would have found it. The evidence pointed in a clear direction: Mrs. Rubillo had died, and the deed of trust had ended. After a long struggle, the land of David's community had finally been claimed for other uses. David stood looking at the place where his house used to be and tried to make a joke: "where it 'Hertz' to rent a car."

David and I made a third trip in August of 2001, just before another reunion of his family. We spent most of an afternoon at the wildlife preserve. Many of the creatures that had lived there in abundance—turtles, frogs, and birds of all kinds—seemed to have gone somewhere else. It was smaller and more challenged than David remembered it. We met some bird-watchers who let us look through their telescope at some massive old turtles sunning themselves on a log.

David used the analogy of a turtle to describe himself to a class of graduate students that helped with the task of understanding David's life.[1] "Imagine," he said, "thousands of little turtles are born in the sand and they struggle to get to the water. Lots of bigger creatures want to eat them. Somehow a few little turtles make it. Then they are in danger from creatures that live in the water. Still, some survive. When you see a big old turtle sunning himself on a log in the middle of the Tinicum Wildlife Preserve, think what he has been through in order to survive."

In April 2002, my team helped organize a conference on community mobilization for trauma recovery, post 9/11. David joined the working group I led. At the end of the hour-and-a-half discussion, as we were getting ready to leave, David asked, "Can I say something?"

I said, "Of course."

"What I just wanted to say," he told the group, "is think of the children. I was a child when I lost my community. I now have lived at the Times Square for seven years—I haven't lived anywhere for seven years. I have always felt insecure, and I just kept moving. Please think of how anxious the children are right now. We want to help them be as secure as they can be."

A few days later, a study of children in New York City schools



confirmed David's thought that the children were anxious. What was remarkable about the study was that it was not simply children in the area closest to Ground Zero who were affected by the attack, but rather children all over the city.

About that time David decided to return to Philadelphia. He couldn't face life in midtown any longer, and he had struggled to no avail to find affordable housing in other New York City neighborhoods. His illness had progressed, and it seemed time to be at home. Once again, I was skeptical, but, as always, David did what he thought was right.

"I'm home," he told me shortly after the move was completed. "It took a long time, but I'm home."