

The Difficult Legacy of Urban Renewal

by Richard Longstreth

Perhaps no term associated with the American landscape is fraught with more pejorative connotations than "urban renewal." Although the Federal Government program bearing that name ended over 30 years ago, the term remains in common parlance, almost always in reference to something that should not have occurred (as in, "This city suffered from widespread urban renewal") or something unfortunate that might occur ("That project would be as devastating as urban renewal"). The term evokes myriad negative references—from the wholesale destruction of neighborhoods we would rush to preserve today; to forced relocation and, with it, community dissolution, primarily affecting underprivileged minority communities; to large-scale commercial development, with cold, anonymous-looking architecture that is incompatible with the urban fabric around it; to vast, little used pedestrian plazas; to boundless accommodation of motor vehicles, including freeway networks destined to augment, rather than relieve, congestion almost from the time of their completion, and immense parking garages that dwarf all that is around them. Critics continue to ask how we, as a society, could have ravaged our cities and towns the way we did. The prevailing view remains that urban renewal affords only lessons in what we must avoid.

The historical reality is, of course, much more complicated. While many of the stereotypical castings have some foundation in reality, our perspective also has been shaped by myths and half knowledge. The urban renewal program is conflated with that for public housing, for example. Advocates for the latter became reluctant allies of urban renewal, but the two programs had entirely different origins and objectives. Initially, their backers were at odds with one another—a relationship that was never entirely rectified.¹ Urban renewal was also not primarily a case of federal officials dictating practices to communities. The heads of local agencies initiated and framed the projects they wished to undertake. The federal role had more to do with enforcing regulations, which, for better or worse, were developed to ensure a reasonable level of professionalism in planning and other relevant functions that were part of the process. Federal standards affected the shape of *every* urban renewal scheme in various ways. Moreover, the immense amounts of money in the federal highway program and decisions at the federal and state levels as to where those highways would go in the inner city had an enormous impact on what areas became targeted for urban renewal.

On the other hand, the ball was in the court of local authorities to determine the basic form, character, and functions of a project as well as to select the consultants, planners, and developers who would translate initiatives from a rough idea to a concrete proposal, then a reality. A number of the best-known and influential urban renewal projects, such as Gateway Center in Pittsburgh (begun 1950), Penn Center in Philadelphia (begun 1956), and Charles Center in Baltimore (begun 1958), were indeed entirely local undertakings, with no federal involvement in any defining aspect of their plans. The federal legislation that framed and facilitated urban renewal—provisions in the housing acts of 1949 and, especially, 1954—was the result of strenuous lobbying by local business interests. Whatever was done to the core of American communities during the 1950s and 1960s was the result of local agendas, not those of the Federal Government.

Urban renewal was foremost the creation of downtown property owners and business interests who, beginning in the 1930s, sought to stem what they saw as a steadily advancing tide of abandonment and decline, which, if left unchecked, would eventually destroy the lifeblood of the city. The word “blight” was commonly used to describe an erosion of commercial property value, and the worst of it purportedly lay on the periphery of downtown. Deteriorated housing and outmoded, small-scale commercial and industrial plants in particular were seen as serious hindrances to downtown growth. Land was difficult to acquire for new commercial development and for new access routes. Blight also tarnished the image of downtown, discouraging investment. Business interests may have propelled blight into the fore, but they found strong allies among planners and many concerned with public policy. In the formative stages of urban renewal, their collective argument was remarkably simplistic: Remove blight and the problems of people who resided in those areas would dissipate as well.

Compounding the problem of declining land values were the ever-increasing movement of the middle class to the urban periphery and the emergence of new facilities in those outlying areas to serve them. Many feared that even if blight were removed, the impetus to build new projects of a scale sufficient to reinvigorate in-town areas would be insufficient when they had to compete with affluent outlying districts. Piecemeal, incremental solutions would prove ineffectual, the argument ran; only sizable undertakings could yield significant change. Comprehensive planning and the power of eminent domain were the essential instruments to retrieve the urban core. A long gestation period led to the federal laws that gave local authorities the tools to regenerate the multi-faceted, dominant role the central business district had long enjoyed in large towns and cities nationwide.

Urban renewal thus tended not to occur in places where property values were high—in the retail and office cores of cities—but rather in places close by so as

to enable expansion or modernization of what were deemed vital core components. Projects included office buildings and hotels, convention halls, government centers, institutional complexes such as hospitals and universities, and cultural facilities such as theaters and concert halls. Equally important was the creation of large new residential areas tailored to middle- and upper middle-income households to bolster patronage of downtown places and to revive the desirability of living in the urban core. Sweeping improvements to transportation infrastructure, almost all of which catered to motor vehicles, were also viewed as key projects. Limited-access highways were deemed essential to facilitate access to downtown, as were capacious parking garages to serve new and existing development alike. Tracts near downtown and sometimes further afield were purposely designated for many wholesale, warehousing, and light manufacturing functions housed in "antiquated" core plants so that the land they occupied could be cleared for more profitable uses. Only toward the end of the period, around the mid 1960s, as the decline of downtown retailing accelerated, did plans emerge in some cities to recast that significant core function in a radical way.

Most cities and many towns in the United States undertook some form of urban renewal activity during the quarter century following World War II. Portions of some major metropolises, including Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Denver, and San Francisco, were substantially changed as a result. Numerous smaller cities from Tucson to New Haven, Sacramento to Sheboygan, were likewise altered. Few movements in American city building have resulted in more sweeping changes.

Quantitative yardsticks aside, the scope and nature of change induced by urban renewal—from in-town living to the proliferation of urban freeways, and from large-scale displacement to accelerated decrease in the very activities identified for rejuvenation—continue to affect the ways in which we inhabit and use cities. Given such factors, the significance of urban renewal in the history of American cities cannot be denied. But what about the *physical* significance of this phenomenon from a historical perspective? Is the landscape of urban renewal imbued with attributes that merit its preservation? Until recently, few people cared to address the issue. Dismissing the whole episode as an aberration in the material as well as in the social and sometimes even in the economic arenas was seldom called into question. The time has come, however, for a fresh, more detached perspective. Urban renewal bestowed upon communities some places of lasting value that can be appreciated if we consider them apart from the baggage they have acquired.

Addressing the issue of preservation for urban renewal sites has been particularly encumbered by recollections of what such projects replaced. Hundreds of Victorian houses in San Francisco's Western Addition and hundreds of an

earlier vintage in Southwest Washington, DC, were among the many thousands in quarters that would have been considered prime historic districts by the 1970s had they not been leveled under the aegis of urban renewal. Preservationists frequently fought against urban renewal; some of their organizations were formed in order to oppose the wholesale clearance that came to be closely identified with that program. Arguably, much of the impetus for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 emanated from the many who feared the wholesale destruction of the past if urban renewal programs remained unchecked. An equally repugnant aspect of urban renewal in the minds of many people was the uprooting of neighborhoods whose residents did not have the resources or clout to fight back effectively—people who, as sociologist Herbert Gans demonstrated early on, had stable, nourishing communities even if they lived in limited circumstances.²

However regrettable, neither the destruction of building fabric nor of communities should detract from the historical significance of what was developed anew. Innumerable buildings and other components of the landscape have replaced things that we would venerate were they standing today. The Empire State Building (1929–31), to name an obvious example, rose on the site of the Waldorf-Astoria (1891–93, 1895–97), which was a key prototype for recasting the urban luxury hotel in the late 19th century and a defining work for its architect, Henry Janeway Hardenbergh, who continued to be instrumental in the development of that type. Indeed, much of Gilded Age Fifth Avenue was replaced by stores, office buildings, and other commercial piles long venerated. Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology (1955–56), one of the most important buildings designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and an icon of Modern Architecture worldwide, replaced The Mecca (1891–92), a remarkable apartment building constructed around twin, multi-story atria.³ Advocates of the Colonial Revival regarded the Victorian legacy as detritus and recommended remodeling or destroying it at every opportunity, but that position does not detract from the significance of their own work.

Nor can the social displacement caused by wholesale clearance in urban renewal, however onerous it was, undermine the determination of significance today. Countless historic sites have tainted pasts in this respect. Central Park displaced a substantial squatter population, and its creation was propelled to a significant degree by the quest for high-end residential development around it. Many loft buildings prized today began their lives as sweatshops.⁴ What urban renewal projects replaced must always be remembered, but should not give cause for rejecting the potential value of what came afterwards.

Another prejudice that needs to be cast aside is ineligibility due to age. Few urban renewal projects broke ground before the mid 1950s. Most were underway through the 1960s or later. The fact that they are less than 50 years old, however, should not inhibit their study and evaluation. The projects that clearly

merit such inquiry from a historical perspective are almost certainly ones that possess exceptional importance within the *local* context, the threshold for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Some examples are arguably of national significance and primary manifestations of important tendencies in design and urbanism of the period. Irrespective of the level of significance, such work generally had a profound impact on the communities in which it was executed. Today, many of these endeavors are vulnerable to changes that may not be for the better. Ignoring the issue under the guise of the standard 50-year rule is to dismiss a historical phenomenon of obvious magnitude.

The tenuous position of urban renewal's legacy is underscored by looking through the lens of landscape design. Preservationists as well as numerous other contingents all too frequently consider these ensembles primarily as buildings, with site and landscape design unrecognized or undervalued.

Taking sound stock of the historical significance of urban renewal is urgently needed because the resources in question are fragile. As has long been the case, the heritage of the recent past seems dated, even antiquated, certainly unfashionable, different from and even counter to the ways in which we prefer to design places today. At the same time, this legacy is insufficiently old in the minds of many people to be designated as historic. Urban renewal projects are especially vulnerable to change since they generally entail complexes or even whole neighborhoods. Thus, *both* buildings and the environment in which they are set are susceptible to unsympathetic changes.

The tenuous position of urban renewal's legacy is underscored by looking through the lens of landscape design. Preservationists as well as numerous other contingents all too frequently consider these ensembles primarily as buildings, with site and landscape design unrecognized or undervalued. Moreover, the copious amounts of open space that characterized site and landscape design of the period are now all too often seen as blank slates for denser development. Why retain an expansive plaza when the site could host a new office tower? Ignoring the landscape dimension runs counter to the framework in which numerous examples were conceived, where landscape architecture was an integral, often underlying, facet of the entire scheme. Open space allotted in generous amounts that today might be castigated as wasteful was indeed considered to be as important to the design concept as the buildings. A misunderstanding of this perspective and a tendency to criticize the results because they are different from what would be done today have led to a very alarming rate of destruction of mid-20th-century landscape designs, many of them developed under the aegis of urban renewal, and promises to threaten many more in the near future.⁵

Presumptions aside, pursuing a rigorous historical assessment will entail no small degree of original research, for systematic, scholarly investigation of the subject remains in a nascent state. There is no shortage of primary source material from the period. The scope and policies of urban renewal were well chronicled in its own day by planners, sociologists, political scientists, and journalists among others.⁶ Issues were debated and many projects critiqued in architectural and other professional journals. Newspaper coverage in the affected communities was extensive. The archives of some local redevelopment agencies have been preserved, but few have been catalogued. Yet, no matter how extensive and accessible the record, it requires substantial amounts of time to review, let alone digest.

Historical interest in urban renewal has increased considerably in recent years, but the resulting studies tend to be broadly based, addressing policies, practices, and their social and political consequences, with scant attention paid to the physical realm.⁷ Scholarly interest to date also has focused more on the shortcomings of the program than on any strong points. A negative profile particularly applies to the relatively few case studies that afford substantive analysis of urban renewal's physical dimensions. Probably the most copious work of this kind is David Schuyler's examination of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which documents the ravaging of the commercial center for a new complex that was in part a functional failure. While of great value for the insights it yields and the detail with which it analyzes the pitfalls of the process, the text can also reinforce the stereotypical view that urban renewal was a pervasive disaster.⁸ Work needs to be done on endeavors that led to more beneficial outcomes.

Begging focused investigation, too, are the biographies of key figures involved: public officials such as William Slayton, Commissioner of the Urban Renewal Administration; Richard Lee, Mayor of New Haven; and planners such as Edmund Bacon of Philadelphia or Edward Logue of Boston. Little is available on the developers who played a major role in a number of cities and whose work, in turn, helped define the nature of that done in many other places. William Zeckendorf perhaps ranks among the most extraordinary and unorthodox of these individuals, but many others, such as Roger Stevens and James Scheuer, as well as corporations such as Reynolds Aluminum and Tishman Construction, are worth further examination.⁹

No matter how bountiful the sources, much of the challenge in assessing urban renewal projects lies with their multiple characteristics and the unevenness with which their objectives were realized. Examination needs to be on a case-by-case basis, with projects analyzed as individual endeavors within a local framework, as well as part of a national phenomenon. The difficult complexion of some projects is well illustrated by New Haven's Church Street Redevelopment Area. Intended to propel the city center into regional dominance as a retail and office hub, the complex suffered at the outset from never

having a master plan shaped by business needs, from a piecemeal layout, and from an inward-looking orientation that perceptually isolated it from neighboring blocks.¹⁰ Although it has often been criticized as a transplanted regional shopping mall, Church Street possessed little of the detailed, program-driven planning that characterized such complexes.

Despite predictions of swift realization, the project took a decade (1957-67) to execute, causing no small degree of disruption to and displacement of the business community in the process. There is no question that Church Street is historically significant, but some of that significance lies in its example as a failure—a scheme that was poorly planned, fell short of its goal to revitalize the business core, and enjoyed a relatively brief life as a viable operation. Today, open land exists where one of the anchor department stores stood; the companion emporium built by Macy's has been vacant for some years. A long moribund, disconnected interior mall lies in the third block, called Chapel Square. The somber, neglected appearance of the ensemble only underscores its tarnished legacy.(Figure 1)

Under the circumstances, the separation of determining significance and determining treatment may be unusually pronounced. If significance is indisputable, what about retention? Some may contend that the whole endeavor falls far short of a priority for preservation and indeed might best be replaced by more site- and need-sensitive development. Yet, Chapel Square itself was not only an early large-scale mixed-use project (shops, offices, hotel) designed by a leading commercial architect in New York (Lathrop Douglass), its spaces are readily adaptable to other functions. Its laconic modernist design is a good representative of its genre and has been a substantial part of the skyline facing the New Haven Green for nearly 40 years. Behind Chapel Square lies another component worth further scrutiny: the Temple Street Parking Garage. Designed by the internationally renowned modernist Paul Rudolph, then dean of Yale's School of Architecture, the garage is a work of great originality, although it presents a massive, foreboding face to the businesses on the opposite side of the street for a two-block stretch.

Relating well to adjacent urban fabric was seldom a concern among those who shaped urban renewal projects and thus should not be a major factor in evaluating the historical significance of such work. Hartford's Constitution Plaza (1959-63), for example, was developed on then-marginal commercial land as a gateway to downtown and a substantial addition to its office, hotel, and parking capacities. Unlike Church Street, it had a strong master plan and represented one of the most ambitious undertakings of its kind from the era. The system of plazas, walkways, and planted open space that gives the complex its pervasive unity was a major work of Sasaki, Walker Associates, among the most prominent landscape architecture firms in the country, and the signature building for the Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance Company was designed by the distin-

FIGURE 1

This 2004 view of the mostly vacant Church Street Redevelopment Area in New Haven, CT, with Macy's department store (1962-64) at left and Chapel Square (1964-67) at right, illustrates the foreboding presence of the complex. In the opinion of many observers, it is an apt testament to the failure of urban renewal. (Courtesy of the author)



FIGURE 2

The great expanses of open space at Constitution Plaza (1959-63) in Hartford, CT, shown here in this view from 2002, represent an important design by Sasaki, Walker & Associates and give coherence to an array of commercial facilities, including Harrison & Abramovitz's Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance Company Building, seen in the background. (Courtesy of the author)



guished New York architects, Harrison & Abramovitz.¹¹ Constitution Plaza remains an important business center for the city, but its limited range of functions and the absence of residential areas nearby mean that its expansive spaces remain unpopulated after hours, and since they lie a story or more above street level, the immediate environs lacks much pedestrian activity at any time. (Figure 2)

Functionally and physically, Constitution Plaza has worked as an ensemble, and preserving anything less than the entire complex would undermine that integrity. But how should one approach the less cohesive legacy of Church Street? Can only a portion of what survives be justified for preservation even though the complex was conceived, however poorly, as a single entity? Does such partitioning run counter to sound preservation practice even though it is hard to assign high priority to a building such as the former Macy's store? Macy's decision to participate, which did not occur until 1962, saved the project

from oblivion and represented a milestone in that firm's expansion program. When it opened two years later, it was not only the first full-fledged department store from New York to operate in New England, but also the second largest emporium in the state. Nevertheless, retaining the building's exterior in anything approximating its original form is problematic given its huge, windowless mass and the absence of demand for so large a retail facility in that location.

Fragmentation may be an undercurrent even when a project had a cohesive, well-considered plan and coherent execution. Baltimore's Charles Center not only ranked among the most ambitious schemes to enlarge a city's commercial core, it also became a poster child for large-scale redevelopment generally and was conceived and executed independent of the federal program. Developed under the aegis of planner David Wallace, the master plan offered a conspicuous exception to the norm in the degree to which it interwove old and new fabric.¹² The initial building, One Charles Center (1960-62) was designed by Mies van der Rohe. A prominent member of New York's architectural avant-garde, John M. Johansen, designed the Mechanic Theater (1965-67), a facility intended to bring major cultural activities to the heart of downtown. Other components were of less singularly distinguished design, but unlike Constitution Plaza, Charles Center as realized has never imparted the sense of a strongly unified ensemble. Indeed, the effect is more of an assemblage of discrete undertakings. Should preservation, then, focus on the most significant parts rather than the whole? Has the ensemble lost a key contributor to its integrity because the skyway system, which never lived up to expectations, has been mostly dismantled? (Figure 3) Conversely, should Charles Center be considered, not only as a single entity, but also as part of a much larger renewal effort that includes the Convention Center and the Inner Harbor for which it served as a catalyst?

Many downtown urban renewal initiatives consisted of multiple projects conceived as components of a long-range master plan. The functional relationships among these undertakings were considered to be central to the viability of the whole and often of the parts. The building of new office towers, the argument ran, would not live up to expectations unless the street and highway network was improved. New cultural facilities would not have sufficient draw unless housing was created nearby for a substantial population with disposable income—a population also important to sustain the office developments. Even a large tract far afield designated as a site for a new mass distribution center could enter the equation because it would replace aged facilities in town so that they could be cleared for some of those housing or new commercial functions. Clearly, evaluation of any given component should take the master plan context into account, but to what degree should preservation objectives be tied to the entire spectrum of work in a community? To what degree, in other words, should an urban renewal project be treated as an entity in its own

FIGURE 3

A major portion of the skyway system at Baltimore's Charles Center (begun 1958), shown here in a 1971 view, has been demolished in an attempt to relate the complex to street level and the surrounding blocks more effectively. (Courtesy of the author)



right, and to what degree should it be regarded merely as a part of an integrated master plan? Is the latter approach practical or even desirable given the scattered array of sites and the varying degrees to which projects were realized and met their objectives?

The answers to such questions, of course, depend on the community. One of the major urban renewal projects in Sacramento, for instance, was Capitol Mall, which transformed the blocks between the river and the state house from an agglomeration of marginal commercial facilities to ranges of public- and private-sector office buildings that were viewed as far more appropriate for the primary approach to the governmental center. While the project was effectively realized, the near contemporary one to extend the retail core along adjacent blocks to the north yielded few concrete results. A series of ambitious plans failed to materialize beyond the conceptual stage. A pedestrian mall and a large, isolated department store that was not an outgrowth of any master plan were the principal products of an effort that extended for over a decade.

Even though current design preferences should never influence the assessment of work from a historical perspective, taste persists as an influential, if not always acknowledged, undertow, especially when addressing work of the recent past.¹³ Boston's Government Center (1964-70) well illustrates the difficulties in allaying taste prejudices despite the fact that the scheme was strong and much praised when it was new. Replacing the Scollay Square area adjacent to the financial district, Government Center was anchored by a grand plaza, which was compared to those of St. Peter's in Rome and St. Mark's in Venice.¹⁴ No less a sweeping gesture was made by the city hall, which rose in the northeast sector of the plaza and was heralded for the bold new language of monumentality it brought to the public realm. Both components were by the then-young architecture firm of Kallman, McKinnell & Knowles and were won in competition predicated on an urban design plan developed by

I. M. Pei & Partners. (Figure 4) To the west rose the federal office building, one of the last designs of Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus and The Architects' Collaborative. Beyond lay a spectrum of other facilities, including the State Service Center by Rudolph, all contributing to an ensemble that ranks as an unusually powerful design of the era.

FIGURE 4

Bracketed by the Federal Building (1962-66) and City Hall (1962-68), Boston's Government Center Plaza, shown here in this view from 1970, is still highly admired as a modernist space by some and disparaged by others. (Courtesy of the author)



Yet, the city hall and plaza in particular have long been vilified as ominous places. The plaza is typically viewed as a barren sea of pavement, lacking any elements that would give it life. City Hall's impact is equally disturbing in the minds of many observers, reading more as a brutal bastion than a harbor of democratic governance. It is hard to find the entrance and one's destination beyond. Inside no less than out, the atmosphere is cast as the antithesis of a welcoming public place. How does one respond to these deeply held views among so many of the people who frequent the premises or work there? Can these issues be addressed without compromising the design's integrity? Should they be addressed, or is the design of sufficient import to justify its full retention?

Examining residential redevelopment under urban renewal may prove easier in certain respects, for program initiatives tended to result in schemes that were not only strong and coherent designs but also appreciated by their constituencies. At the same time, these projects generally represented avant-garde views of community that created settings very different from traditional neighborhoods. Unlike areas that extended the commercial core, where the existing street configuration could seldom be modified to any great degree, new housing tracts tended to be somewhat further afield in places where the matrix could be modified to suit the modernist canon. Thus, superblocks became the norm, penetrated only by small streets and cul-de-sacs, with through traffic kept to the periphery. The presence of motor vehicles was indeed minimalized. The traditional American pattern of parking the car close

or adjacent to the dwelling was abandoned for more remote parking lots that often were screened from view. Sometimes enclosed, even underground, parking garages were utilized. All these arrangements facilitated devoting large amounts of open space to pedestrians.

Site planning was closely tied to building design. The row house, which had fallen from favor among the middle class by the second quarter of the 20th century, was revived—and rechristened the “town house” to enhance its marketability—to render the area occupied by buildings as compact as possible. Houses were generally accorded small private yards; most of the open space was communal—another feature that ran directly against long prevailing patterns. The arrangement of housing clusters, as they were called, was done in ways to encourage community interaction. Open spaces were frequently varied somewhat in their dimensions and components, and the houses could have staggered setbacks, differ in size, or have varying details to avoid the sense of monotony associated with historic row house neighborhoods. Often, too, houses were interspersed with apartment towers, which were not the traditional chunky blocks with embellished fronts and utilitarian sides, but rather were freestanding towers—linear “slabs”—that maximized exposure to natural light and air as well as to views for all the dwelling units.

In another pronounced departure from tradition, urban renewal housing complexes tended to be inward looking without necessarily having a strong presence when viewed from the principal streets. Their public face, in other words, may not be nearly as engaging as their private one. The inner sanctum was enhanced through landscape design. As some of the primary examples of large-scale development forged on the principles of modernist urbanism, the projects attracted many of the nation’s foremost landscape architects who used them as opportunities to refine their ideas. Today, these landscapes have reached maturity and often have sustained little or no substantial alterations, making them distinguished and significant examples of the period.

Prominent modernist architects also were attracted to these projects. As a result, numerous cities have major residential projects of high caliber. The Portland Center in Portland, Oregon, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and Lawrence Halprin & Associates (1968-71); St. Louis’s Plaza Square by Harris Armstrong and Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum (1960-61); San Francisco’s St. Francis Square by Marquis & Stoller and Halprin (1963-65); Minneapolis’s Cedar Square West by Ralph Rapson (1968-73); and Chicago’s Hyde Park by I. M. Pei and Harry Weese (1957-61) are among the numerous exceptional enclaves of this genre. Mies van der Rohe and his close associates, planner Ludwig Hilberseimer and landscape architect Alfred Caldwell, designed Detroit’s Lafayette Park (1956-65) for Herbert Greenwald, the maverick Chicago developer who became a leading sponsor of avant-garde design.

Even as realized with later additions, the ensemble represents the most fully formed manifestation of their internationally influential urban vision.¹⁵

Equally ambitious residential undertakings of this kind occurred in the Southwest Redevelopment Area of Washington, DC, which, between 1959 and 1972, emerged as a precinct of 10 housing projects as well as a number of individual buildings. Intended as a model for the urban renewal program, the enterprise included work by an array of young talent. The first complex helped propel its architect, Chloethiel Woodard Smith, into the national limelight as a leader in the housing field. Two other distinguished Washington firms—Charles Goodman and Keyes, Lethbridge & Condon—also made major contributions that received widespread acclaim. (Figure 5) Pei, Weese, and Morris Lapidus contributed also. Major portions of the landscape were designed by Daniel Urban Kiley, Sasaki, Walker & Associates, and Wallace, McHarg, Roberts & Todd. Few other places rival the degree to which the brave new world of urban life envisioned by modernists was manifested with such richness and variety.¹⁶

Such projects attracted many households who likewise harbored a view of community that differed from the norm—one that was grounded in engagement and activism. Their neighborhood was not just a domestic sanctuary, but a staging ground for change. Many embraced residential diversity, at least to the degree that the cost of purchasing these dwelling units allowed. Often, the projects were the first in their cities to be planned from the start as racially integrated. Many residents considered themselves to be pioneers whose commitment to the city was nurtured by the desire to make urban life a better experience. That spirit can still be found decades later and has led to steps that will ensure protection in some cases. Surrounded by decay, Lafayette Park was recently designated as a local historic district in response to a residents' initiative. Threat of overdevelopment has spurred discussion to take similar steps in Washington, DC. Although now considered to be dated and even "failed experiments" by some planners, these communities have remained viable places to live and are indeed enjoying a revival among a new generation who finds both the physical environment and the community it shelters an appealing alternative to conventional market housing.

If urban renewal's residential projects did suffer from a failed agenda, it was that they seldom served their intended role as catalysts for additional revitalization but instead remained oasis-like enclaves. The major exception was Philadelphia's Society Hill (officially called Washington Square East; 1960-75), which set preservation as a top priority. In the great majority of urban renewal endeavors, existing fabric was seen as something best eliminated. Occasionally, a remnant of the early 19th century was judged to be of sufficient historical significance to retain. These vestiges of a distant past were either left to stand in isolation, affording a sticking contrast to everything around them, as with

the Basilica of St. Louis, King of France (1831-34), in St. Louis, or, less often, were woven into a new context, as with Wheat Row (1794-95) in Southwest Washington, which became part of a large new row house and apartment complex.¹⁷ Even in a rare case where the existing stock in the Southwest was acknowledged to have some historic merit, authorities believed that the market did not exist for restoration and rehabilitation. Work of that order then underway in Georgetown and in Alexandria, Virginia, was believed to be saturating the meager demand for such places.

FIGURE 5

Tiber Island (1963-65) by Keyes, Condon & Lethbridge, shown in this view from 1991, was one of more than 10 housing projects that made Washington's Southwest Redevelopment Area one of the nation's most ambitious urban renewal undertakings. It was widely praised for the high caliber of its design. (Courtesy of the author)



In Society Hill, by contrast, massive retrieval of historic fabric was employed for the first time as an instrument to spearhead urban revitalization.

Numerous dwellings, churches, and a few other building types, all dating from before the mid 19th century, remained, affording an incomparable urban landscape. Although most of this fabric had long deteriorated as low-rent rooming houses and small-scale commercial facilities, it was earmarked as the key inducement to turn the precinct into one of choice among households of substantial means. Society Hill was to a large degree the conception of Edmund Bacon, director of the Philadelphia Planning Commission, who believed the area should also be a showcase of modern design. Through the work of Pei as well as such prominent local firms as Mitchell/Giurgola and Louis Sauer, Society Hill bucked the then-prevailing trend of having infill buildings in a historic district feign the appearance of period pieces. Equally unusual was Bacon's plan to retain all streets and alleyways and weave into this grid a subtle network of pedestrian ways and plazas—designed by the landscape architecture firm of Collins, Adelman & Dutot—that were places to foster community interaction. Society Hill was a benchmark in demonstrating that preservation could be a powerful tool in revitalizing cities and that old and new design could be compatible.¹⁸ The project also spawned what remains a growing field of investment in historic properties over many blocks to the west and south. Society Hill was one of the rare cases where the renewal activities became contagious.¹⁹

The issues involved in addressing urban renewal projects are hardly new. They rise to the fore constantly in preservation when evaluating resources of many types and especially when examining districts and such complexes as institutional campuses. The underlying challenge is to approach the task with an open mind, checking one's assumptions at the door as it were, and acquiring a strong base of knowledge of pertinent source material. The concept of cultural landscape is particularly valuable for examining the legacy of urban renewal because of the emphasis it gives to multi-faceted parts as well as to the processes of change over time. This concept, too, brings the significance of *designed* landscapes to the fore, while placing them in larger physical and cultural contexts. The widespread prejudices against urban renewal and much of the legacy of the second half of the 20th century generally must be set aside in order to assess the real significance of such initiatives. Our cities and towns changed dramatically during the postwar era, and we can ill afford to dismiss those transformations out of hand.

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Notes

1. For background, see Marc A. Weiss, "The Origins and Legacy of Urban Renewal," in *Urban and Regional Planning in an Age of Austerity*, eds. Pierre Clavel, John Forester, and William W. Goldsmith (New York, NY: Pergamon Press, 1980), 53-80, which offers an excellent overview of the subject.
2. Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1962).
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 16. The most detailed coverage of the precinct is given in "Historic American Buildings Survey, Southwest Washington, DC, Urban Renewal Area" (HABS No. DC-856) [2005]. For a sampling of published historical accounts, see Frederick Gutheim and National Capital Planning Commission, *Worthy of the Nation: The History of Planning for the National Capital* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), Chapter 14; James M. Goode, *Best Addresses: A Century of Washington's Distinguished Apartment Houses* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 398-412, 426-31; and Howard Gillette, Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), Chapter 8.

17. The Urban Renewal Program actually funded a number of historic preservation endeavors, including the seminal College Hill and Vieux Carré surveys in Providence, RI, and New Orleans, LA, respectively. For brief discussion, see "Interview with Dorn C. McGrath, Jr.," *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* 2 (winter 2005): 16-18.
18. For background, see Valerie Sue Halverson Pace, "Society Hill, Philadelphia: Historic Preservation and Urban Renewal in Washington Square East" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1976); and Marietta Harte Barbour, "Overcoming Urban Renewal: Preservation in Society Hill, Philadelphia" (master's thesis, George Washington University, 2005). The significance of Society Hill in preservation and as a modern landscape is discussed briefly in Richard Longstreth, "Integrity and the Recent Past," in *Preserving the Recent Past* 2, ed. Deborah Slaton and William G. Foulks (Washington, DC: National Park Service, Historic Preservation Education Foundation, and Association for Preservation Technology, 2000), 2-1 to 2-6; and idem, "The Last Landscape," in *Preserving Postwar Landscapes*, 118-25. Period sources include Stephen J. Thompson, "Philadelphia Design Sweepstakes," *Architectural Forum* 109 (December 1958): 94-99; Edmund N. Bacon, "Pei in the Sky and Other Aspects of the Philadelphia Story," *Architectural Association Journal* 79 (November 1963): 103-12; Philip Herrera, "Philadelphia: How Far Can Renewal Go?" *Architectural Forum* 119 (August-September 1964): 179-93; and William L. Rafsky, "Success Comes to Society Hill," *Historic Preservation* 18 (September-October 1966): 194-95.
19. The historic district nomination approved by the Philadelphia Historical Commission several years ago extends Society Hill's period of significance through the 1960s, acknowledging the importance of the mid 20th century for that precinct and enhancing the protection of components from that period.



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