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A Capital Plan: Government Inertia and Urban Revitalization on U Street

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The alternating pattern of development and decay is a natural condition in America's cities. Innumerable communities have undergone the process of revitalization including, battling bureaucracy, overcoming financial difficulties, and navigating administrative quagmires. While the general operating principles of revitalization are widely similar, the resolution of specific challenges – those distinctive to a particular area – usually determine the success or failure of an effort.

The lack of an active city-led planning process is the specific challenge to U Street, a neighborhood undergoing revitalization in Washington, DC. The roadblocks facing U Street go beyond conflict and varied interests; in this case, finding solutions will require looking seriously at the frameworks and relationships that surround the process of revitalization.

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The government of the nation's capital is steeped in problems of mismanagement and inadequate funding. While this study describes the role that a healthy government plays in promoting revitalization, it also acknowledges the reality facing some urban centers: A weak or unhealthy government is incapable of coordinating and implementing a comprehensive planning effort, which in turn requires those interested in rebuilding to devise alternative strategies to coordinate and lead a planning process.

Creating a Context for Civic Action

Although the modern metropolis is profoundly different from cities of the past, the struggle to live together on civilized terms within the boundaries of the city continues. Human communities create the context for that struggle and, when successful, they encourage individuals to create a definable sense of place out of which grows a place-specific identity. This identity provides a rationale for groups with differing agendas to connect and contribute toward a common vision.

Participation in a local neighborhood or community is an archetype of human existence and a laboratory in which individuals can come together to promote the common good. "It is through our involvement in a community that we come to understand obligation,"¹ and a focused assembly of community voices and obligations is es-

sentia to a successful urban environment. "[The] expansion of public responsibility leads us to experience an interdependence that we both recognize and resent."² However, communities often address only immediate issues and fail to create mechanisms for solving long-term structural problems. The absence of such mechanisms, at its most profound, amounts to the abrogation of civic duty and, coupled with the disaggregating forces of modern life, plants the seeds of urban decay.

The Decline of the Inner City

These disaggregating forces include the massive redistribution of population and capital from the central city to the suburbs, which has afflicted nearly every metropolitan area in the country. In the last half century, widespread use of the automobile has accelerated residential growth outside the urban core as homeowners found affordable housing in the suburbs.³ Eventually, these suburban residential communities attracted industry and capital, further undermining the vitality of the central city.

The decline of the city was hastened by a well-intentioned, if ultimately detrimental, series of federal programs and policies. The federal government financed a system of highways that drastically reduced commuting time from the city to the suburbs.⁴ In addition to a national highway system, the federal government initiated mortgage insurance programs that reduced the risks to residential mortgage lenders and en-

couraged the construction of single-family homes in the suburbs.⁵ Many of these mortgage programs, administered by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), engaged in the discriminatory practice of "redlining," which used race as the criterion for defining high-risk mortgage areas, influenced the lending patterns of banks, and prevented many minorities from initially purchasing homes in the inner cities where they lived. In turn, the inability of minorities to build equity in their existing dwellings effectively prevented them from "buying up into homes in the suburbs."⁶ As a result, a large percentage of the population of central cities now consists of low-income minority renters.

Compounding the population shift was the transformation of the economic base of cities from manufacturing to service economies. As Galster writes, "...the economic role of cities changed dramatically as a result of interregional population migration, innovation in industrial technologies, and national shifts in the sectoral composition of the economy. The net effect of these developments would be the substantial erosion of central-city employment opportunities for minority and low-skilled workers."⁷

A visitor to almost any American city would certainly bear witness to abandoned and derelict buildings, defunct factories, run-down public housing complexes, and pot-holed and litter-strewn streets. Nowhere are

the consequences of these programs and problems more evident in the District of Columbia than in the physical deterioration of the city, the decline in available city services, and the rise in unemployment rates. Yet Washington, DC has become neither a relic of the past nor solely a holding tank for the dispossessed. The inherent value of all cities as loci of communication, business, history, culture, and art endures, even in the District of Columbia.

To help rebuild cities, the federal government invested as early as 1949 in urban renewal programs that were steeped in controversy and met with varied success.⁸ Programs differed among communities, but from the 1960s through the mid-1970s urban renewal generally amounted to government acquisition and clearing of land to promote private investment -- an approach that often displaced thousands of people and achieved little of the hoped-for development.⁹ Given shifts in federal funding patterns, urban renewal during the 1980s and 1990s came to mean local economic development, driven by private investors and facilitated by local governments through tax incentives, zoning regulations, and other regulatory tools.

Renewal efforts have most often been targeted at downtown business districts which are perceived as having the most potential for private investment and the greatest likelihood for improving the quality of life throughout the city. Adjacent neigh-

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neighborhoods and their residents have been largely unaffected by this downtown development,¹⁰ and several recent efforts have shown that true renewal of the city occurs only through investment and planning in all neighborhoods.¹¹

Urban Revitalization: Process, Players, and Partnerships

Recent efforts at reversing urban decay have been aggregated under the term 'urban revitalization.' Revitalization is defined as "giving new life or vigor to,"¹² and urban revitalization refers to giving new life to an inner-city neighborhood.

Older industrial cities of the Northeast were the first to use revitalization to counter the decline of their urban cores. Revitalization often takes place in neighborhoods that are located near the traditional central business area, which have a distinct architectural style and aesthetic character, and contain affordably priced property with investment potential.¹³

Gentrification, or the middle-class resettlement of older inner-city neighborhoods formerly occupied by working class or lower-class residents, is a typical component of the revitalization process. Gentrifiers are usually young white-collar professionals, single or married, often without children, who are particularly attracted to inner-city neighborhoods because of the historically distinctive architecture, cultural amenities, and proximity to the central business district.¹⁴

To achieve success, revitalization must bring together all affected parts of a community, including government, investors, and community organizations to develop and implement a common vision and plan. Cooperation among the parties is essential to realizing broad-based comprehensive revitalization.

A city government's involvement in revitalization varies according to an area's characteristics. At a minimum, city governments are responsible for providing basic services such as trash collection, public transportation, public safety, and infrastructure, though several cities have exceeded their minimum obligations and become active partners in revitalization programs. By initiating a comprehensive planning process and guiding development, city governments often provide a trained city planner/coordinator, create a vision for an area, modify existing zoning codes and tax structures to encourage development, ensure that basic services are provided and local needs are being met, and bring the plan to life.¹⁵

City governments also contribute to the revitalization process by providing financial assistance. Several funding mechanisms – Enterprise Zone/Enterprise Community (EZ/EC) initiatives, city grants, and low-interest loans – are directed primarily at inner city revitalization.

The federal government's primary means of supporting local efforts in the regeneration of neighborhoods have been Community Development

Block Grants (CDBG) which may be used for a wide range of activities important to the revitalization process, including acquisition of property for public purposes; construction or reconstruction of streets, water and sewer facilities, neighborhood centers, recreation facilities and other public works; demolition; rehabilitation of public and private buildings; public services; planning activities; assistance to non-profit entities for community development activities; and assistance to private, for-profit entities to carry out economic development activities. Allocation of the funds is determined according to a "statutory formula which takes into account population, poverty, incidence of overcrowded housing and age of housing."¹⁶

Revitalization efforts also gain substantial benefits from investors who realize the future economic potential of an area and put money into existing or proposed homes, buildings, and institutions. Although investors provide the crucial element for revitalization – money – their presence can be a mixed blessing. These investors may be well-intentioned but their goals – to realize a return on their investment – may conflict with the goals of local residents and community groups who want to transform their neighborhood for purposes other than the private gain of a few individuals.

Non-profit organizations, often formed around various community-specific issues in response to commu-

nity needs,¹⁷ work to improve an area by providing services as well as a framework for collaboration with the community. Non-profit organizations often focus narrowly on their own individual goals for the betterment of the community; this singular focus can prevent these groups from acting as a unifying force that brings together the many groups involved in revitalization. However, non-profits play a significant role in revitalization, since they are often more approachable than city governments and are able to provide services tailored to specific individuals.

Despite their uneven results, urban renewal efforts maintain their place as the most important means of mitigating the effects of the abandonment of the urban core. The District of Columbia has been the frequent target and/or recipient of various renewal and revitalization initiatives, but these initiatives have faced a host of difficulties distinctive to the circumstances of the District of Columbia.

Planning Washington-Style

Washington, DC's status as the nation's capital and seat of the federal government sets it apart from other cities. The District was not permitted to do any of its own planning until passage of the District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization (Home Rule) Act in the mid-1970s; prior to that time, planning for the city was done by the federal government. Even now, the National Capital Planning Commission, which

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had responsibility for planning in the District prior to home rule, still maintains its central role to protect the federal interest.¹⁸ Other agencies with planning responsibility include the General Services Administration, the National Park Service, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Defense.¹⁹

In the 1980s, shortly after home rule was established in the District, Mayor Marion S. Barry, Jr., initiated a comprehensive planning process. The plan aimed to "serve the people and work for the preservation of neighborhoods and toward improving the quality of life throughout the District." The Mayor planned to implement this process by publicly setting "explicit policies for the future development and management of the city [that] will allow the community to predict the course of public action."²⁰

This comprehensive plan, passed in 1984, had a 20-year time span and covered every part of the city. Despite the city's efforts, the plan was criticized by citizens, community groups, City Council members, and planning experts for being too vague, dealing only in generalities, and lacking prioritized objectives or particular details.²¹

In 1984, the City Council ordered Mayor Barry to draft plans for each of the city's eight wards in the District as a means of adding clarity and detail to

the original plan.²² Development of the ward plans involved a block-by-block study of the city. These ward plans were designed to complement the overarching comprehensive planning process. To further strengthen this process, the City Council passed a bill in 1989 to make zoning laws compatible with the plan by denying building permits to developers whose designs met zoning requirements but conflicted with the comprehensive plan.²³

Even with these effort, the budget crisis of the early 1990s dealt the process a nearly fatal blow: The city's planning department suffered a massive downsizing, shrinking from 86 full-time workers in 1989 to 18 full-time workers in 1998²⁴, tremendously decreasing the department's ability to become involved in the specific community debates. In addition to insufficient staffing, the planning department was – and still remains – technologically deficient in a profession that is becoming increasingly reliant on computer software programs for mapping and modeling.²⁵ The failure of the planning department to provide staff or technological support to the various aspects of the comprehensive planning process brought progress in this area to a standstill. The fate of the planning department was particularly poignant in light of the fact that the District was the first U.S. city to have been designed by a professional planner, Pierre L'Enfant.

The History of U Street

The focus of this study is a seven-block section of U Street, between 9th Street and 16th Street, in Washington, D.C.'s northwest quadrant. From the 1930s through the 1950s, U Street was a thriving community and a center of African-American culture and commerce. Famous entertainers such as Cab Calloway, Pearl Bailey, Billie Holliday, Duke Ellington, Redd Foxx, and Nat "King" Cole regularly played the U



*Lincoln Theatre at 13th and U
Historical Society of Washington, DC – Wymer Photograph Collection*

Street clubs and patronized the multitude of restaurants and shops owned and operated by African-Americans.²⁶ U Street was well known for its nightclubs, including the Republic Gardens and Club Bengasi at 14th and U, the Bohemian Caverns at 11th and U, the Capital City Club and Lincoln Theatre at

13th and U, and the Howard and Dunbar Theatres at 7th and T Streets.²⁷

In addition to entertainment, Howard University, founded in 1867 to train African-American teachers and preachers, lies just northeast of U Street and was partly responsible for U Street's prominence.²⁸ The True Reformers Building, located at 1200 U Street, served as a recreation center and was one of the first buildings in the country to be designed, financed, and constructed by African-Americans. The Whitelaw Hotel at 12th and T Streets opened in 1919 as the first African-American apartment hotel in Washington and was located just around the corner from the first African-American YMCA in the world.²⁹ The Industrial Bank, owned and operated by African-Americans, is still in business today and has catered to area residents since 1935.³⁰ In addition to these major businesses, smaller "mom and pop" shops, retail stores, restaurants, and small service establishments dotted every block of U

Street.³¹

Ironically, U Street's eminence arose from the restrictions of a segregated Washington and its demise was hastened by a far-reaching Supreme Court opinion designed to foster integration. For much of Washington, DC's history, African-Americans had been

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effectively excluded from large areas of the city and U Street, known as the 'Second City,' became the cultural and commercial hub of African-American Washington.³² In 1954, the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in schools, and the desegregation of Washington's previously all-white restaurants, bars, and hotels soon followed. City and

*The Industrial Bank has catered to area residents since 1935.
Historical Society of Washington, DC – Wymer Photograph Collection*



suburban establishments and neighborhoods slowly opened to include African-Americans; as a result, the need for a Second City disappeared and the vibrancy of U Street began to fade.³³

The final blow to U Street came in 1968 following the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when riots and fires closed most of the U Street businesses and forced many residents to move. Nearly twenty years later, in 1985, the Metrorail system chose the U Street corridor for a subway stop; the five-year construction period left the street and sidewalks torn up, preventing patrons from reaching the surviving businesses and making it difficult for vehicles to use the street.³⁴

In fifty years, U Street was transformed from the place to be into the place not to be. The richness of the local community had been extinguished; the neighborhood's claim to being the 'Black Broadway' was over.

Planning on U Street: City Government, Developers, Small Business and Community Groups Join Together--Sometimes

Revitalization on U Street started in the late 1970s, inspired in part by the neighborhood's lively history and potential for change. U Street's history as a center of commerce and culture, as well as its architecture, proximity to downtown and popular neighborhoods, public transportation



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Historical Society of Washington, DC – Wymer Photograph Collection

and trendy start-up businesses, made the area a prime candidate for revitalization. As a result, local government, community members, and private developers considered ways to restore the neighborhood to its former glory by preserving some of the historic buildings and nightspots, cultivating new businesses, and encouraging tourism in the area.

A. City Government

People who had faith in U Street's future realized that the city government needed to be involved in the planning efforts. However, by the time revitalization efforts took off, the city government could be of little assistance. Its planning efforts scorned and its planning department decimated, the city could not be the kind of partner that the citizens of U Street wished for. Although Mayor Barry was initially enthusiastic about the re-

vitalization efforts, he was suffering his own political troubles and could not provide the needed long-term support.

Although the mayor was not an active partner, the city has not been entirely outside the revitalization process. In 1982, the city began constructing a \$42 million municipal center at the corner of 14th and U Streets with offices for 1,000 government employees. Project supporters believed that development of the municipal center would have a ripple effect in the neighborhood, spurring medium- and small-sized commercial development. Initially, the municipal center generated positive change; new businesses moved into the area, the crime rate dropped, and real estate values increased.

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Another large-scale government project was the renovation of the Lincoln Theater on U between 12th and 13th Streets. In 1985, two years after the theater was vacated and boarded up, developer Jeffrey Cohen began renovating the theater with a \$4 million loan from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and \$1 million from personal funds. When Cohen filed for bankruptcy and donated the theatre to the city, the renovations were more than halfway complete. The government stepped in and committed an additional \$4.7 million to finish renovations.

Although the city government committed financial resources to U Street, the projects met with mixed success. Small businesses in the area faced hardships due to higher land values and increasing rent. Neighborhood residents were disappointed that the municipal center's employees did not generate the expected increase in business for local merchants. One local business owner contends that businesses turn over about every six months.³⁵ While these comments are characteristic of the effects of renewal, they also reveal the piecemeal, uncoordinated form of development that is occurring along U Street.

Part of the community's disappointment with revitalization efforts is exemplified by the Lincoln Theater, which re-opened its doors in 1994. Despite the costly renovations, the beautiful, historic theater sits dark many nights and has not reclaimed its

earlier glory. Located across the street from a Metrorail station, situated close to restaurants, bars, and popular neighborhoods and just minutes from downtown, the theater appears to be drastically underused.

B. Developers

Private developers provided most of the investment in the U Street area. While private money was crucial to the area's economic growth, the developers' investment effectively put them in charge of revitalization. Although this investment in neighborhood revitalization was welcome, the singularity of the developers' focus — getting a return on investment — meant that they often ignored the broader public good. Developers often worked apart from local community groups in the neighborhood, fostering feelings of antagonism between community groups and developers.

The sale of the former Thompson's Dairy site on U Street is a prime example of the tensions between the community, government, and developers. Exclusive development rights to the 1.3-acre parcel of land at a price substantially below market value were awarded to AMB, a private development company that planned to build mixed-income housing units.³⁶ Merchants welcomed the development of additional housing units for the increased business potential and boost to neighborhood development, but opponents argued that the process for choosing the developer was unfair and that a multifamily development did not fit the needs of the neighborhood.

The process by which the developer was awarded exclusive development rights angered and frustrated some residents. Instead of inviting developers to compete in a 'request for proposals' process for the land, then-Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly signed off on the unsolicited proposal from AMB without considering competing bids.³⁷ When Mayor Barry returned to office, he continued to support the AMB proposal and encouraged City Council members to do the same. Some council members voiced concerns about AMB's ability to complete the \$44 million project because the company had no experience in developing a project on this scale.³⁸ Initially the plans were for a ten-story, 369-unit structure. Construction is currently underway on a 115-unit structure called 'Lincoln Condominiums'.

C. Large and Small Businesses

In recent years, large national retail chains and fast-food restaurants have moved into U Street. What was once a neighborhood of small "mom and pop shops" now includes large national chains such as McDonald's, Dunkin' Donuts, and Rite Aid Pharmacy. National chains contribute to revitalization efforts by generating jobs and commerce, but since their profits are unrelated to the stability of any one neighborhood they are less likely than smaller businesses to be responsive to community needs.

Small businesses are also an integral part of U Street's economic vitality since "Local companies and businesses provide a stabilizing force

in distressed and emerging areas."³⁹ On U Street, revitalization efforts of the early 1990s slowed when the general economy went into recession; in that climate, few businesses were willing to take additional risks by entering an uncharted commercial neighborhood.

Commercial life has slowly re-entered the area as the general economy has improved. One of the first businesses to start turning the tide of U Street was Polly's Cafe. Pierre Mattia, a restaurant owner from New York City, wanted to replicate his New York business and viewed U Street as a perfect place: the neighborhood was underserved, in a great location, and renting space was much cheaper than in neighboring areas of the city, such as Adams Morgan and Dupont Circle. Mattia, encouraged by his success with Polly's Café, opened another restaurant, Coppi's, at 14th and U Streets which has also been successful.

D. Non-profit groups

Many non-profit organizations are located along the U Street corridor. Two organizations attempting to respond to community needs are Manna, Inc., and Funds for the Community's Future. Manna, Inc., a well-known housing corporation, has developed a community development corporation (CDC) in the neighborhood encompassing U Street. The goal of the Manna CDC is to create an economic development plan by residents, business owners, and other stakeholders resulting in economic opportunity for the community. The

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CDC's two primary initiatives are creating a job placement agency run by and for the community and stimulating economic development through tourism.⁴⁰

Manna has joined other organizations in Washington, DC to entice visitors away from traditional tourist sites and onto U Street. One of the most prominent organizations is the Coalition of Off the Mall Heritage Groups, a 57-member organization which promotes the link between tourism and economic development to help communities benefit from tourist interest in history and culture. The coalition is helping U Street capitalize on its rich history as a center of African-American community, culture, and music by promoting tourism as a profit-making enterprise that will increase the area's investment potential.

The coalition believes that large groups of visitors will be drawn to the area if the neighborhood's history is captured and marketed effectively. Efforts are underway to develop history exhibits, construct historic markers designating points of interest, and develop bus and walking tours of the area. An installation of photos and historical information surrounds a lot at the corner of 13th and U Streets and the first bus tour of the area is slated to be given in July 1998. Perhaps most importantly, the National Park Service is constructing the first African American Civil War Memorial in the country at U, Vermont, and 10th Streets and is due

to unveil the monument in the summer of 1998.⁴¹

Many of the potential historic sites, such as the home and office of Carter G. Woodson, the father of black history, stand defunct and abandoned. The coalition believes that such historical landmarks will become attractive to investors and renovated if U Street tourism is promoted. Coalition members are optimistic about the ripple effect that development will have if tourism takes root.⁴²

Funds for the Community's Future (FCF) is a non-profit organization that works to "involve, improve, and invest" in the community by providing post-secondary scholarships to students who volunteer in neighborhood projects. FCF forms a collaboration between high schools and the community by identifying needs and organizing students to make neighborhood improvements. Money raised from the community through student sponsorship or fundraising efforts supports the scholarship fund.

FCF's contribution to the community is measured by the experience that residents gain in understanding community issues. Under FCF's guidance, people participate in community activities such as street clean-ups, tree planting, and painting murals. At the same time, students learn the importance of shared public spaces and community life. Thus, FCF provides opportunities and organizational structures that enable people to focus on common issues and build a community.

Thoughts for the Future

Depopulation of the cities and the transformation of the urban economic base have created a crisis situation that threatens the future of urban areas in the United States. A complex array of socioeconomic problems face policymakers and residents; though the problems are inter-related, no magic solution exists to bring about change.

Ideally, local government will lead and implement a comprehensive plan to revitalize urban neighborhoods. Regrettably, the government of Washington, DC appears unable to make a significant investment of time, effort, and money in the U Street area. The DC government has – at least theoretically – the greatest influence in neighborhood revitalization, the greatest means to bring about such revitalization, and the greatest ability to stitch together the various interests of U Street's constituencies into a coherent group. Accordingly, the District's absence from the process is a serious impediment to U Street's future.

When local government is both the principle actor and the principle obstacle, community residents are forced to find other ways to achieve their goals. In this situation, the economic vitality of a neighborhood -- including U Street -- depends primarily on stimulating the growth of private investment in the neighborhood. Establishing partnerships between government, non-profit groups, small business, and private investors becomes a workable way to blend gov-

ernment resources with the knowledge and financial capital of others. Public/private partnerships can help distressed communities create realistic goals, develop a vision and plan, attract investment, and create jobs.

Since the District government is currently not taking the initiative to guide revitalization on U Street, development will continue in a piecemeal fashion. Fortunately, community stakeholders believe that U Street can regain its place as a center of commerce and culture in Washington. Their dedication and efforts at renewal indicate a successful future for U Street.

The story of U Street's redevelopment is one of stops and starts, rising hopes and dashed expectations, investment and bankruptcy, government inertia and community vigor. Although some believe that the area's full potential will never be realized, the neighborhood has so many assets – including a rich history, aesthetic potential, prime location, active citizenry, and suitable infrastructure – that development seems almost inevitable. Still, much needs to be accomplished. ♦

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Notes

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⁴² Dominic Moulden, Executive Director, Manna CDC, interview by authors, 10 March 1998.

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