

Urban Redevelopment in Nashville:

The Benefits of Adaptive Reuse

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HON 3110-01: Topics 20-21st Century World

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April 24, 2016

The history of urban renewal is wrought with controversy. From the enactment of several national housing acts from 1937 through 1954, the looming question has been whether or not urban renewal is progressive or destructive to communities in the long run. The birth of the debate coincided with Title I of the 1949 Housing Act, which provided federal financing for the clearance of rough neighborhoods in American cities.¹ The heart of the debate stems from a mid-twentieth century belief that if the government removed people from slums and placed them in a more pleasant environment, it would not only improve their lives but also inspire them to be more wholesome citizens. What followed the slough of housing acts and construction of large-scale roadways was a number of government funded building-centric redevelopment projects that displaced entire impoverished communities for the sake of “cleaning” cities of crime, slums, and other un-pleasantries. In Nashville this led to lawsuits, protests, and many racial tensions. In other cities, it devastated the economy, wrecked morale, and left huge and ugly vacant spaces undeveloped. Given the tumultuous history of top-down redevelopment, perhaps people in cities should look into creating a bottom-up community planning system to keep their cities beautiful and functional.

During the New Deal, the projects were seen as positive and refreshing. It was not until the late 1960s they took on a negative connotation.² This shift in perception was due in part to Jane Jacobs – author, journalist, and one of the 60s biggest urban renewal

¹ United States. Congress. House. Housing Act of 1949: Hearings before the Committee on Banking and Currency, House of Representatives, Eighty-first Congress, First Session, on H.R. 4009. Compiled by Johnathan Vodochodsky. By United States Senate. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1949. April 16, 2015.
http://historyculturebybicycle.blogspot.com/2015/04/urban-renewal-vshistoric-preservation_59.html.

² Carey, Bill. "A City Swept Clean." Nashville Scene. September 6, 2001.
<http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/a-city-swept-clean/Content?oid=1186025>.

critics. In 1961, she published one of the first critiques of large-scale redevelopment in her book The Death and Life of Great American Cities. The book expressed her support of, among other things, mixed-use development and bottom-up community planning.^{3,4} Though widespread opposition would not begin until a few years later, Jacobs's critique brought forth similar opinions against urban renewal that still hold today, especially in shifting, expanding American cities like Nashville.

Nashville and Start of Urban Renewal

Indeed, Nashville has experienced its fair share of growing pains, and patterns of government-run urban renewal have been prevalent in Music City since the late 1930s. The National Recovery Act of 1933 allowed federal housing for the purpose of increased employment rates, and the National Housing Act of 1937 placed public housing and slum clearance hand-in-hand. According to the Act of 1937, for every unit built on a public housing project, a "substandard" unit had to be razed. Substandard, however, is never defined in the document except as it relates to "very low-income families", and thus, many of the buildings destroyed in redevelopment plans were deemed subjectively substandard based on demographics alone.⁵ It worked in developers favor for the qualifications to be vague so no one challenged the wording until much later. The government funded two housing units in Nashville under this act: Cheatham Place and

³ Project for Public Spaces. "Jane Jacobs - Project for Public Spaces." Project for Public Spaces. Accessed April 16, 2016. <http://www.pps.org/reference/jjacobs-2/>.

⁴ Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York City, New York: Random House, 2002.

⁵ United States Senate. *United States Housing Act of 1937 as Amended by the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998 as of 3/2/1999*. PDF. Washington, DC: Financial Services Committee.

Andrew Jackson Courts. Though they were segregated, the government felt they inspired clean living, and they would serve as a springboard for larger, future projects.

The Capitol Hill Redevelopment Plan: Top-Down Approach

The goliath of all Nashville's federally funded redevelopment projects was not a public housing project. It was, by and large, the 1950s overhaul of Capitol Hill.^{6,7}

During that time, the area that surrounded Capitol Hill was known by three primary names: Sulphur Dell, the Black Business District, and the Market District. Industrial-type businesses, African American homes, and low-end housing occupied the space.⁸

The Capitol Hill Redevelopment Plan demolished over 400 homes and displaced 301 families and 196 single residents, most of who were African American. The demolition of "blighted" homes caused the mass exodus of poor families with nowhere to live. Immediate relocation was impossible, and those evicted from redevelopment sites could not afford rent many other places in the city.⁹ Even though the government granted evicted individuals an allowance to cover their rent, long waiting lists plagued any family or individual who managed to find a decent apartment on federal fare. In addition, the project also brought on an onslaught of eminent domain lawsuits against the city and

⁶ Carey, Bill. "A City Swept Clean." Nashville Scene. September 6, 2001. <http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/a-city-swept-clean/Content?oid=1186025>.

⁷ Tennessee State Library Archive. "The Tennessee State Library and Archives Blog: Tennessee's State Capitol Has a Unique History." Library & Archives News: The Tennessee State Library and Archives Blog: Tennessee's State Capitol Has a Unique History. March 20, 2013. <http://tslablog.blogspot.com/2013/03/tennessees-state-capitol-has-unique.html>.

⁸ Hayes, E., S. Levine, and J. Tackett. "Capitol District History." Urban Redevelopment in Nashville. April 2014. <http://stajuelletahay.wix.com/urbanredevelopment#!about2/ca08>.

⁹ Erickson, Ansley T. Making the Unequal Metropolis: School Desegregation and Its Limits. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2016.

developers.¹⁰ This was all to alleviate traffic problems along Jefferson, Church, and Charlotte and provide parking for State employees.

From a neighborhood standpoint, the razing of homes and apartment buildings on Capitol Hill was successful. Some of the sites were historical and beautiful but sorely outdated. Coal furnaces in residential buildings sent a flume of pollution over Nashville. Dual sewer and storm drains flooded streets with sewage. The razing of these old mechanisms created a more pleasant living environment while preventing street floods. It was also true that Capitol Hill had a much nicer curb appeal.^{11,12} But while the Capitol Hill project may have healed the body of a neighborhood, it infected the soul of a community.

The Edifice Complex as a Symptom of Top-Down Community Planning

Edward Glaser, author of Triumph of the City, refers to this as the “edifice complex”. The idea that tearing down buildings will solve human problems like poverty and crime doesn’t hold water. Actually, a study at Duke University showed that gentrified areas exhibited an unexpected increase in property crimes like burglary, theft, and auto theft.¹³ In places like Detroit, the edifice complex destroyed the economy,

¹⁰ Carey, Bill. "A City Swept Clean." Nashville Scene. September 6, 2001. <http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/a-city-swept-clean/Content?oid=1186025>.

¹¹ Capitol Area Before. Nashville. Compiled by Historic Nashville. <https://historicnashville.wordpress.com/2009/03/17/capitol-hill-before-urban-renewal/>.

¹² Aerial of Tennessee State Capitol Area, Nashville, Tennessee, 1961 January 03. January 03, 1961. Record Group 412, Closed Stacks, Metro Archives RG 412, Nashville. Compiled by Metropolitan Nashville/Davidson County Archives, Nashville Public Library. <http://digital.library.nashville.org/cdm/ref/collection/nr/id/6176>.

¹³ Duke University. Crime Rates in Selected Cities and Neighborhoods, 1970-84. PNG. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

morale, and former soul of the city.¹⁴ Nashville's edifice complex may not be as devastating or notorious, but there are places in the city where one can find implementation of building-centric ideals. Three of Nashville's most slick, commercial neighborhoods are the product of urban renewal and gentrification: the hip 12 South shopping district with overpriced coffee and young, middle class families; the Gulch, an old, sooty railroad neighborhood now chic and professional; and Music Row, Nashville's most fought over and historical territory.¹⁵ Of course, there is no inherent problem with having nice buildings and amenities, especially when the areas are mixed-use. The problem arises when developers utilize buildings as nothing more than facades for crumbling societies.

The Possibility of Adaptive Reuse

Buildings should be celebrated as hubs of community and change – two vital elements of a thriving city. The challenging aspect of renewing old buildings is redefining the dated space to fit a modern need. As our culture changes from decade to decade, historic buildings do not have to become useless, echoing rooms destined for demolition. Like clothes, buildings go in and out of style. Empty warehouses are a popular site for modern art studios and galleries. In my hometown, a historic dollar movie theater has been transformed into a funky church venue. In an article for the website Rebuilding Place in Urban Space, journalist and urban revitalization consultant Richard Layman asserts that an abandoned building is not a mistake but a

¹⁴ Cohen, Deborah L. "Edifice Complex." ABA Journal. July 01, 2010.
http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/edifice_complex/.

¹⁵ Billboard Staff. "Preservation Groups Unite to Save Nashville's Music Row." Billboard. February 03, 2015.
<http://www.billboard.com/articles/business/6458320/music-row-preservation-groups-unite-nashville>.

disinvestment.¹⁶ The process of finding new functions for old buildings is called adaptive reuse and should be seen as reinvestment in a building or property.

Challenges of Adaptive Reuse

Unfortunately, architects and engineers have found that – just as not all buildings should be destroyed – not all buildings can or should be rescued. The obstacles that stand in the way of developers who seek to repurpose a historic building are sometimes much riskier and more expensive than a demolition project. For one thing, if the building is on the National Register of Historic Places like many abandoned structures, its rehabilitation requires more permits and regulations than its destruction.¹⁷ That alone is enough to turn some developers away from adaptive reuse. Other old buildings require repainting, replumbing, or rewiring, which can hike up building and labor costs considerably.¹⁸ Furthermore, in Nashville and larger cities, old buildings like early skyscrapers were designed as beautiful energy vortexes, and in many cases these structures do not allow for a quick and easy energy-efficiency renovation.

There are solutions and encouragements for the challenges of an adaptive reuse approach. During the redevelopment of Capitol Hill, Jefferson Street perhaps suffered the greatest damage. Jefferson is a historically black business district in Nashville and is

¹⁶ Layman, Richard. "Demolition vs. Preservation as a Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy: Baltimore, Muncie, Indiana, Etc." *Rebuilding Place in the Urban Space*. May 11, 2015. <http://urbanplacesandspaces.blogspot.com/2015/05/demolition-vs-preservation-as.html>.

¹⁷ Ceraso, Karen. "Eyesore to Community Asset: Historic Preservation Creates Affordable Housing and Livable Neighborhoods." *National Housing Institute -- Shelterforce*. July/August 1999. <http://web.archive.org/web/20140712134727/http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/106/ceraso.html>

¹⁸ Kadlecsek, Cary R., and Timothy H. Watkins. "Adaptive Reuse: Boom or Bust?" *Retail Law Advisor*. October 01, 2014. <http://www.retaillawadvisor.com/2014/10/01/adaptive-reuse-boom-or-bust/>.

located near Fisk University and Meharry Medical College.¹⁹ In response to the razing of businesses and homes around Capitol Hill, a group of concerned citizens formed the Jefferson Street United Merchant Partnership (J.U.M.P.). This non-profit organization, led today by At-Large Metro City Councilwoman Sharon Hurt, seeks “to develop, foster and promote cooperative economic development through revitalization, acquisition, education and public safety programs in North Nashville”.²⁰ Their focus lies primarily in allowing people in the community to have a voice about business and development in their area. Their approach, as Jane Jacobs suggests, is bottom-up.

Several considerations go into an adaptive reuse project including cost, character of the building, history, surroundings, and location.²¹ However, passion is the main ingredient to any successful venture. Buildings may be expressions of passion, but passion itself irrefutably starts with people. Like the members of J.U.M.P. and Sharon Hurt, an effective project starts with a group of hard-nosed, zealous folks. A pristine example of this is Marathon Village in Nashville.

Amidst the razing and disregard for history, the Marathon Village stands strong in a plot of land near downtown. The earliest portions of the huge four-block complex were built in 1881. Later sections of the building were added when the now-extinct automobile company called Marathon produced vehicles there from 1910 to 1914 when

¹⁹ Historic Nashville, Inc. "African Americans in Nashville." Nashville Historic Inc. 2016. Accessed April 16, 2016.

http://www.historicnashvilleinc.org/history/african_americans_nashvillem.

²⁰ J.U.M.P. "About Jefferson Street United Merchant Partnership | JUMP Nashville and Metro Nashville Workforce Development Program @ JUMP." JUMP Nashville and Metro Nashville Workforce Development Program JUMP. 2016. Accessed April 18, 2016. http://www.jumpnashville.com/about_jump.

²¹ Kadlecsek, Cary R., and Timothy H. Watkins. "Adaptive Reuse: Boom or Bust?" Retail Law Advisor. October 01, 2014. <http://www.retaillawadvisor.com/2014/10/01/adaptive-reuse-boom-or-bust/>.

the company went out of business.²² After the company died out, the remaining warehouse became clogged with addicts, thugs, and prostitutes. Shootings and drug deals were not uncommon in the overgrown weeds that surrounded the building. Barry Walker may not have even found the complex had he not been interested the history of the building, eventually leading to his ownership of one of the few Marathon vehicles still in existence.²³ When he found the building and surrounding area in such disorder, he came up with a plan to restore the building as a place for creative entrepreneurs to work and practice their crafts. He purchased the first of the property in 1986 and is still developing after thirty years. Walker personally funded all the renovations with his time and money. This is in great contrast to the renewal of Capitol Hill. No building was demolished, no human beings displaced from their homes, and the beautiful exposed brick and artisan feel of the building is inspiring for creative who seek out offices.

And they do seek them out. The most well-known businesses housed there are: Antique Archaeology, the store of *American Picker* star Mike Wolfe; Lightning 100, Nashville's local radio station; and formerly, the Yazoo Brewing Company. Smaller creative businesses fill the rest of the office spaces – everything you could think up from photography to ice cream sundaes. Barry says he always tried to keep it mostly creative. “I never really pushed retail,” he says. “I had so many people wanting in.”²⁴

²² White, Abby. "Industrial Revolution: How Marathon Village Became Creative District, Top Tourist Attraction." Nashville City Paper. December 07, 2012. <http://nashvillecitypaper.com/content/lifestyles/industrial-revolution-how-marathon-village-became-creative-district-top-tourist-a>.

²³ Marathon Village. "About Us." Marathon Village Nashville Commercial Spaces and Studios in Historic Marathon Motors Building. 2007. Accessed April 15, 2016. <http://marathonvillage.com/about.htm>.

²⁴ White, Abby. "Industrial Revolution: How Marathon Village Became Creative District, Top Tourist Attraction." Nashville City Paper. December 07, 2012.

So how did he do it without caving to external money or government funding? Time, desire, and a long-term plan that included four main phases of renewal. The first phase renovated a 32,000-square-foot office building, complete with suites. The second phase redeveloped one of the larger buildings called the Foundry. Walker went into a lot of work during the third phase to make the building safe and accessible. He focused heavily on parking lots, lights, entrance locations, landscaping and the courtyard area. The buildings are still in the fourth phase of the project, which is simply ongoing renovation and growth until Walker feels the complex is complete.²⁵

The caliber of work Walker put into revitalizing the Village would never have been possible under a government-run development process. The pay-off would have been too slow, the risk too high, and the building may have been torn down and forgotten forever. Walker's passion for Nashville and for the buildings in the Village pushed his work and made Marathon a commercial success. By limiting his building tenants to creative, he catered to the people and the beat of Nashville. Marathon was an outlet the city and the area needed in order to grow. The Village became a hub of community and the sharing of ideas and in essence, became a miniature town of its own.

As a resident of Nashville – or any city – it is critical to be aware of the way the city shifts and changes over time. Consciousness about Nashville's history and buildings can inspire and enable you to make a difference in the culture of the city itself. The Nashville Housing Authority (NHA), though not entirely or intentionally villainous,

<http://nashvillecitypaper.com/content/lifestyles/industrial-revolution-how-marathon-village-became-creative-district-top-tourist-a>.

²⁵ Marathon Village. "About Us." Marathon Village Nashville Commercial Spaces and Studios in Historic Marathon Motors Building. 2007. Accessed April 15, 2016. <http://marathonvillage.com/about.htm>.

continues to redevelop impoverished areas of the city at the expense of those who cannot afford to live anywhere else. This is happening right now on my very short street between 8th Avenue South and 12th Avenue South. My quirky house, originally built in the 1930s, is slowly being encroached upon by clean-looking townhomes. A Publix is going literally right across the street from where I sleep, and our reasonable rent as Belmont college students – not even impoverished, inner city kids – is threatened. Old buildings all over the city are endangered daily by huge edifices like the Music City Center and the Convention Center. A huge high-rise is about to go up where the historical Midtown Nashville once stood. Development will continue to press in on Nashville's history, but if there is a building someone is passionate about, that person has a voice and a path cut by people like Barry Walker and Sharon Hurt.

Adaptive reuse is an investment and like all investments, it takes precious time to pay off. Economically, it makes more sense to demolish a building than nurture it back to health. It is true that not all buildings can or should be rescued by adaptive reuse, but there should be more consideration of reuse as an alternative in some neighborhoods. Razing entire neighborhoods is not only messy; it is destructive to community. When developers choose to invest in people rather than place, cities will thrive under their care. But right now, in the competitive, money-hungry world of development, an abandoned building's only hope may be passionate people who live in its midst.

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