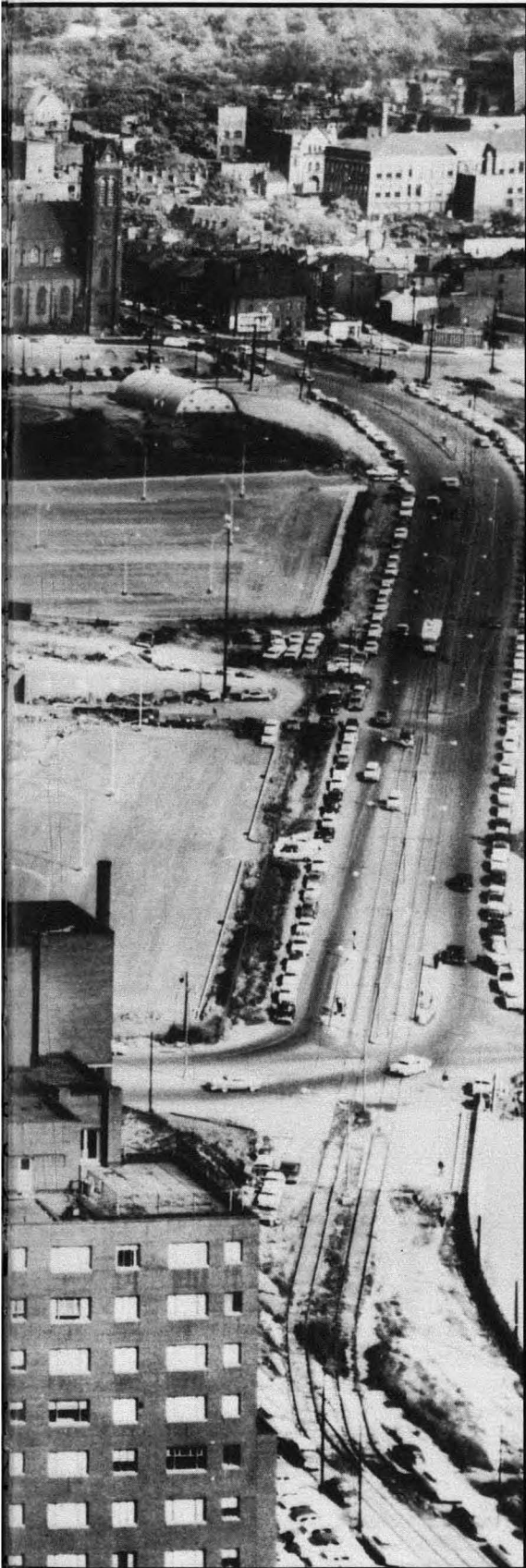


Redevelopment & Response:



The Lower Hill Renewal and Pittsburgh's Original Cultural District

by William J. Mallett

OVER the past 10 years momentum has been building for the creation of a cultural district in the Penn/Liberty avenues area of downtown Pittsburgh. Anchored around Heinz Hall, home of the Pittsburgh Symphony, the cultural district contains an historic district, several theaters, a performing arts center, and art galleries, among other features. (See guide on p. 188) The coalition of public and private groups planning the cultural district views its development as an integral part of a redevelopment and economic growth strategy benefitting the entire city. Cultural and entertainment activities, it is believed, will stimulate economic growth by creating an environment which will attract hotel, office, retail, and residential developments. Such thinking is not unique to Pittsburgh. Indeed, the use of cultural districts and art centers as economic development tools is a growing trend among civic boosters across the United States.¹

Employing the arts as a redevelopment tool in a growth strategy, and the creation of a specific cultural district, are not new ideas in Pittsburgh. A similar plan was proposed during the city's first period of urban renewal, the so-called Renaissance, immediately after World War II. As part of an urban renewal project focusing on the Lower Hill District, the original cultural district in Pittsburgh, known as the "Center for the Arts," was projected to sit behind the Civic Arena in what is now the Arena parking lot. The Lower Hill project aimed to replace 100 acres of "blighted" housing and the area's predominantly African-American

William J. Mallett is a Ph.D. candidate in City and Regional Planning at Cornell University. He wishes to thank members of the Department of Geology and Geography at the Regional Research Institute at West Virginia University for their support during the research for this article, especially Robert Hanham, John Pickles and Mary Beth Pudup. *Left:* The Civic Arena nears completion in 1961. The Arena was the only publicly financed structure ever completed in Pittsburgh's original "cultural district," intended to include an art museum, music hall, and other attractions. Minor criticism met the plan when announced in the early 1950s, but a decade later, as black political consciousness and power grew, so did objections to displacement of the Hill District's residents, most of whom were black. Twenty-five years passed before another cultural district began to take shape — this one a mile away downtown, with commercial, not residential real estate.

residents with arenas, auditoriums, theaters, luxury apartments, hotels, and offices. Together with the Civic Arena, the Center for the Arts — itself to include a two-theater playhouse, a combined grand opera house and symphony hall, and an art museum — was to form a “cultural Acropolis” on the Hill: a part of the urban fabric designed to propel Pittsburgh through the rest of the twentieth century.

Anyone familiar with Pittsburgh will know, however, that no such cultural district exists; the arts center was never built. This failure accounts, at least partially, for the fact that today Pittsburgh has less performance space per capita (as of this writing, in mid-1991) than similar cities such as Baltimore, St. Louis, and Cleveland, providing the rationale for the development of the cultural district now being built.² Moreover, the failed development of the arts center has left it a neglected part of the Renaissance’s history, unlike the various successes of the period such as Point State Park, Gateway Center, and Mellon Square. More importantly, perhaps, neglecting to examine failures like the arts project runs the risk of perpetuating the misconception that the Renaissance was a fully successful, fully coherent period of redevelopment instead of one rife with contradictions and revisions.

Here I seek to redress this historiographical oversight by answering a number of questions. In particular, what was the thinking behind building a cultural district at that time? How did plans for the arts center develop over two decades? Why, given the success of the Renaissance, did this project ultimately fail? And what does its failure tell us about the nature of the redevelopment process in Pittsburgh during the Renaissance? The Center for the Arts was part of the more general Renaissance program to renew downtown, enhance real estate values and property taxes, and to create a modern city core stretching from Point Park to Oakland. I argue, though, that from its inception in the mid-1940s to the most definite plan in the early 1960s, building an arts center came to mean building a hall for the Pittsburgh Symphony. Further, the failure of the arts center project was related to unsuccessful attempts to renew more of the Hill District in order to “protect” the proposed center and its patrons from the poor inhabitants and their “unsightly” housing. Finally, I believe that this failure resulted from a political struggle by Hill residents to save their poor but vibrant community from destruction; this struggle helped redefine the Renaissance’s development, incorporating, however marginally, the needs and aspirations of poor and minority residents of the city.

Focusing on the Center for the Arts project reminds us, then, that the Renaissance must be seen as two related periods of redevelopment. The first, running from the end of the war to the early 1960s, was typified by a “top-down” planning process involving the complete physical reconstruction of strategic parts of the city with little or no opposition. The second period, from the early 1960s to around 1970, was marked by greater

The Melody Tent “amphitheater,” c. 1960, with the Civic Arena going up. The summer performance tent was located on what was to be part of a cultural center expansion that would have replaced at least 50 additional blocks of Hill District residences. (The Melody Tent seats, minus the tent, are visible on Crawford Street beyond the Arena parking lot in the upper right of photo on page 177.)



social conflict over the process and goals of urban renewal. Accordingly, more emphasis was placed on social renewal and the rehabilitation of physical structures in this later period, but without the resources, particularly capital, necessary to go ahead with projects to match those of the early Renaissance. The Civic Arena parking lot and the Upper Hill were battlegrounds over which the different elements of the city fought for control of the redevelopment process. As it turned out,



the Center for the Arts was the major casualty of the conflict — planned in the first period but blocked in the second — with the resulting stalemate leaving the Arena parking lot as it is today.

Lower Hill Transformation

Constructing a cultural center was part of a broader plan to physically

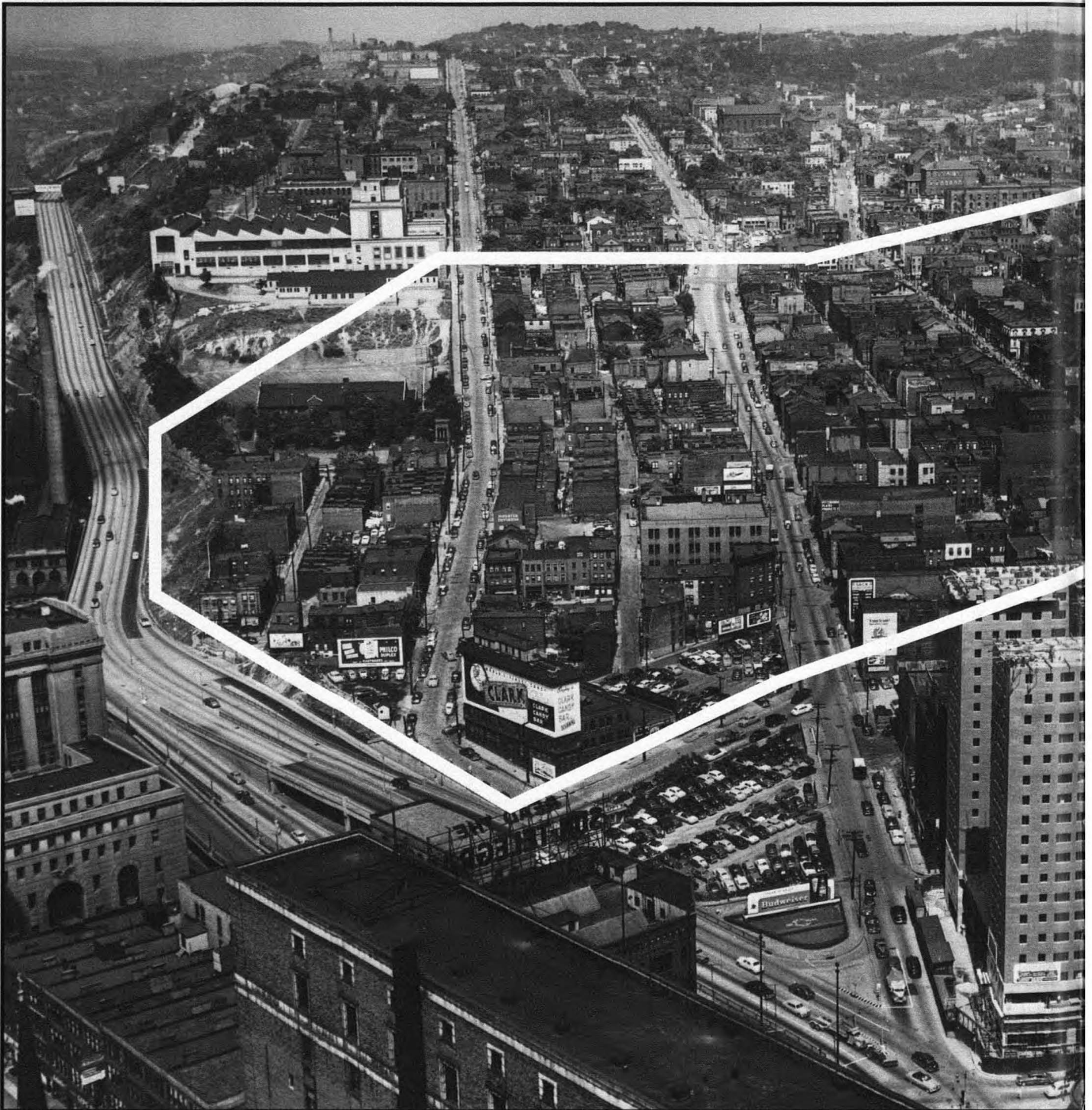
and economically regenerate Pittsburgh. Like downtown reconstruction and flood and smoke control, the “cultural Acropolis” aimed to rid Pittsburgh of its “Smoky City” image in order to attract and retain capital, highly qualified professional, management, and technical people, and consumer dollars. The Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce

The cultural center plan is a neglected piece of Pittsburgh’s ‘Renaissance’ history.

argued such a project would enhance the city's prestige and reputation, both important elements in "attracting new talent and new capital to the Pittsburgh region."³ Likewise, the Allegheny Conference on Community Development envisioned that the creation of a cultural area would dispel "the lingering conception of Pittsburgh as a 'milltown' that is bereft of any beauty and grace," continuing that "many civic leaders, including David L. Lawrence... entertain this hope for a bright new image of progress and cultural enlightenment for Pittsburgh."⁴ In the words of Mayor Lawrence, Pittsburgh needed to become a "big league" city to compete

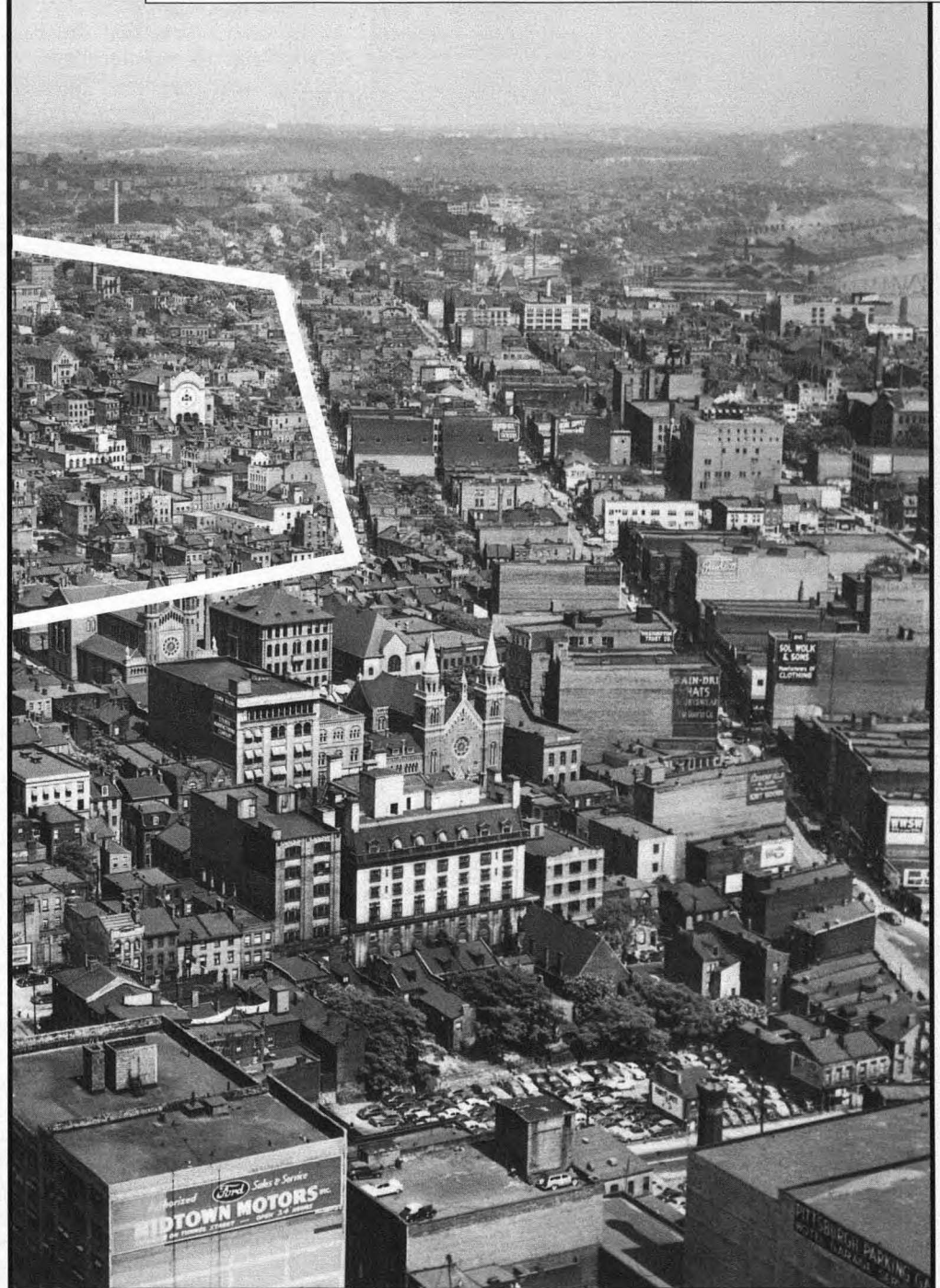
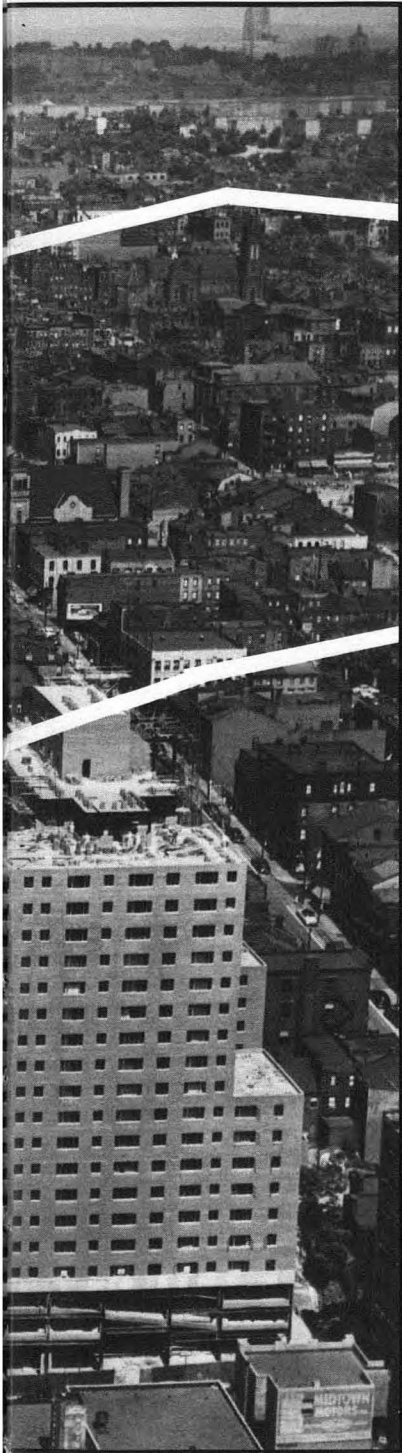
with other "big league" cities for capital, jobs, and status. Robert Pease, ex-executive director of the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh and former executive director of the ACCD, expressed it like this:

Mayor Lawrence... always said that Pittsburgh, if it's going to survive in the long run, has to be a big league city. We have to have major league ball teams, major league symphonies, major league government; and to have that we have to have major league stadiums and major league symphony halls.⁵



Left: The Lower Hill, July 1951, with the former *Sun-Telegraph* building partially shown in the foreground and the Bigelow Apartments (now Ramada Hotel) under construction (front right). Marked is the area demolished to make way for the Civic Arena. Bigelow Boulevard skirts the left edge, then from left, the Lower Hill's key roads: Bedford, Webster, and Wylie avenues.

The Lower Hill was an historic district, serving as a first-stop for European immigrants and African-American newcomers to the city. By the mid-twentieth century, the area had become largely a black neighborhood — or slum, in the eyes of civic leaders. *Below:* (Continuation of the adjacent photo.) From the U.S. Steel-Mellon Building looking toward the Lower Hill, July 1951. Fifth Avenue cuts diagonally across the center of the photo. The demolition area is outlined. The boundaries: Colwell Street, one block off of Fifth; east toward the Upper Hill at Crawford Street; west toward downtown, Chatham Center.



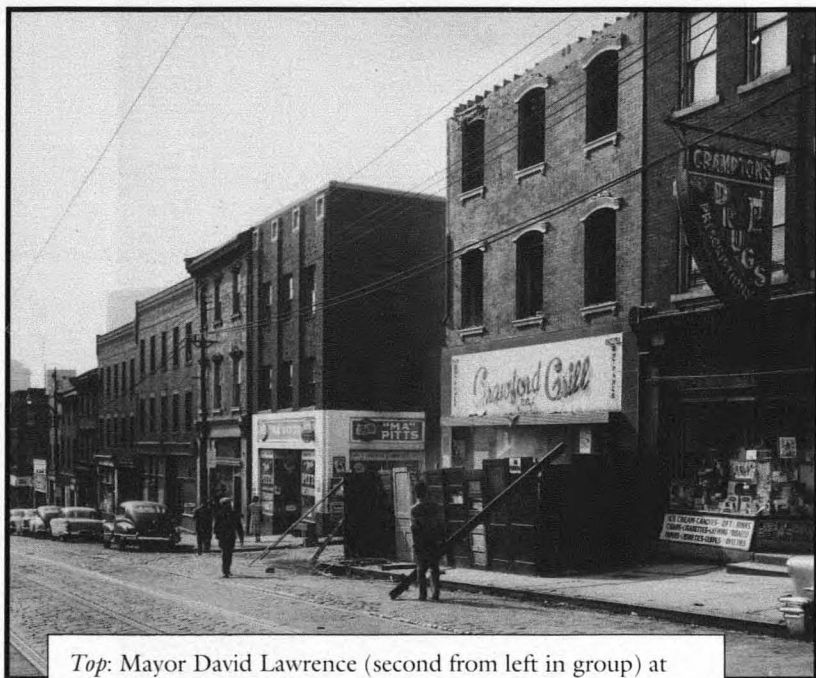


Hill was the original and preferred site for “major league” arenas and symphony halls after WWII. To begin with, the redevelopment would restore the Lower Hill’s real estate values, which were falling faster than anywhere in the city. And as the Chamber of Commerce noted in its report on the situation, the Lower Hill was the “largest area of contiguous realty open to potential stimulus.”⁷ Moreover, redevelopment of the Lower Hill was necessary to aid the full redevelopment and restoration of real estate values downtown, the central Renaissance project. Again, the Chamber of Commerce noted in the same report that the Lower Hill had the “best relationship of site location to the overall Triangle development program.”⁸ Finally, the “blighted” nature of the Lower Hill prevented the creation of an attractive modern core stretching from Point Park downtown to Schenley Park in Oakland, and this core, observed the redevelopment authority, is “the true regional capital of the Pittsburgh metropolitan area.” As the ACCD noted, the Lower Hill project “will remove the blighted barrier to the east of the metropolitan business district and may pave the way for ultimate future rehabilitation for the entire Hill District.”⁹

From the earliest plan, announced in October 1947 by Richard K. Mellon, president of the Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association, the Lower Hill was chosen over five other unspecified locations for an arena-auditorium known as the “Pittsburgh Center.” Although the planning association’s concept is not mentioned in his book on Mayor David Lawrence, historian Michael Weber concludes that the Lower Hill was chosen after failed attempts by redevelopment authorities to locate an auditorium in East Liberty or Schenley Park.¹⁰ Yet, these latter options were only explored after it became clear that building in the densely populated Lower Hill would present significant financial problems associated with purchasing the land and relocating thousands of residents.¹¹

As it eventually transpired, the Lower Hill was chosen as the site for the new auditorium when the federal government provided the financial means for the destruction of houses there and relocation of its residents via the 1949 Housing Act, the first urban renewal legislation.¹² Subsequently, in 1950, John P. Robin, executive director of the redevelopment authority, announced that the URA had obtained about \$15 million in federal urban renewal funds and an additional \$1 million in state funds to build a “glittering new Hill District to match the Point Park Development.” The URA submitted the final plan for the Lower Hill District, including the arts center, to the city council in 1955.¹³

Wholesale relocation of the Lower Hill’s residents and the destruction of their homes began in 1956. Between the setting up of a relocation field office in April



Top: Mayor David Lawrence (second from left in group) at ceremonies marking the start of the Lower Hill’s demolition on May 31, 1956, at 1206 Epiphany St. As late as 1961, prominent foundation and business leaders recommended knocking down every house in the Hill District, reasoning that wealthy arts patrons would not come to cultural institutions near the “ghetto.” *Bottom:* The 1400 block of Wylie Avenue, October 1956, a few months before it was destroyed. A cafe-bar called Crawford Grill exists today in the 2400 block of Wylie; the establishment shown here was called Crawford Grill “No. 1.”

Those lofty goals were tempered by the more practical goal of restoring land values in the central city, an important element in economic regeneration and a project around which the business community and local government could cooperate. Restored values were important for both business and city government, the latter relying heavily on property taxes to fund city services.⁶ Consequently, for several reasons, the Lower

1956 and the dedication of the arena in 1961, a total of 1,551 families, 458 individuals and 416 businesses were relocated. Given the complex nature of the project, renewal efforts proceeded very smoothly up to the end of the 1950s. Projected to take four years, relocation of the Lower Hill's inhabitants and clearance of their homes was completed in only two years. There was little community opposition. Most probably believed the official statements: that renewal would lead to economic regeneration; complete reconstruction was the only solution to the physical decay of the area; there would be adequate relocation assistance, and new low-cost housing would be built.¹⁴ Such beliefs stemmed in part from the infancy of the urban renewal process. But they also arose from the consensual nature of decision-making in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This consensus was no accident. Indeed, it had been molded by the Allegheny Conference through the careful construction of a powerful civic coalition incorporating big-business, local government, and other private-sector agencies. This cooperation between the private and public sectors was personified by the association of Richard Mellon, the most prominent businessman in the city, and David Lawrence, Pittsburgh's mayor and head of the city-county Democratic political machine.¹⁵

Most dramatically and visibly, the Civic Arena rose from the rubble of the Lower Hill as the centerpiece of the reconstruction. Boasting what was then the largest dome in the world, the \$20 million facility was to be a site for light opera, sports, trade shows, conventions, and all manner of extravaganzas.¹⁶ With its progress moving along smoothly, attention turned to the next phase of redevelopment.

Pittsburgh's Center for the Arts

In the earliest stages of post-war planning, separate structures were not considered for the arts, sporting events, and conventions. Both public and private agencies proposed a multi-purpose building for diverse uses.¹⁷ Over the years, this strategy was replaced with one that called for separate facilities, and not until 1953, with the entry of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development into the process, was the location of the arts center narrowed down. After commissioning a redevelopment study of the Hill, the conference proposed that the 10 acre site immediately east of the Civic Arena — the so-called Melody Tent Lots — be the site of the center.

Private foundations were very careful to secure the Melody Tent Lots for cultural uses. Under the terms of the federal grant and loan, the URA had to make a settlement with the federal government by 1961 on the land to be redeveloped. In 1959, the A.W. Mellon

foundation advanced \$1 million for the Melody Tent Lots, aimed at assuring space for the cultural center in case no other developer came forward. In June 1960, three foundations — the Howard Heinz Endowment, the A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, and the Buhl Foundation — contributed \$200,000 to study and plan the symphony hall. Less than a year later, in May 1961, an anonymous foundation (the Howard Heinz Foundation, as was later revealed) offered \$8 million to design and construct the hall.¹⁸

A new Carnegie art museum was planned for the cultural district, with the natural history museum remaining in Oakland.

In the 1953 plan, the Center for the Arts was to include a two-theater playhouse and a combined grand opera house and symphony hall. However, after the Heinz promise in 1961 of \$8 million for a symphony hall, it became the dominant part of the development, and plans for a grand opera house and playhouse were dropped from arts center plans. The symphony hall was to be the permanent home of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, which, noted H.J. Heinz in a memorandum, "has emerged as a most important Pittsburgh cultural activity in terms of community rep-

utation." Moreover, Heinz wrote that "the growing celebrity of the Orchestra will be further enhanced by providing it with its own Symphony Hall."¹⁹ Seating about 2,300, the hall was estimated to cost \$1.8 million and was to be entirely financed by the Heinz Endowment.

An art museum with a restaurant was the other major element in the arts center plan in the early '60s. H.J. Heinz II favored names such as "The Carnegie Museum of Fine Arts" or "The Pittsburgh Museum of Art" for this two-floor, 170,000 square foot building. Heinz noted in a memo that "if there is a dream of building a new Museum of Natural History, it seems far better to build a brand new Art Museum and then let the Natural History Museum take over all of the space now occupied by the Fine Arts Department" in the existing Carnegie Museum.²⁰ In 1962, the new museum's projected cost was \$6.94 million, but Heinz was unsure how it would be financed.

Several other less prominent features emerged in the arts center plan of the early 1960s. The Buhl Foundation was underwriting a plaza and private developers were being counted on to build an apartment complex. A 100,000 square foot "Arts Center Exposition Hall," serving as a conference hall — recall that the conference hall function of the Civic Arena facility had been eliminated — was planned next door to the arena, so that the main auditorium and exposition hall could be used jointly or separately. Finally, there were plans for an underground car park for 2,400 cars.²¹ The projected cost of the exposition hall and garage was \$17.96

million, and Heinz was confident most of that amount would come from government (\$8.5 million from federal sources and \$6.5 million from the state).

Architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill provided a breathtaking imaginary walk through the center, as it was imagined in the early 1960s:

The main entrance for the Center for the Arts is from Crawford Street on the eastern side. Driveways and broad entrance walks lead on to the main plaza level into a large court or rotunda. The Rotunda is covered except for its center. In the center is a pool 80' in diameter with powerful fountains of water shooting high in the air. This fountain is ringed by columns supporting a ceiling of gracefully curved beams, transferring the loads of the square roof to the circular pattern of the columns. Opposite the entrance side is a wide plaza landscaped in geometric patterns composed of seasonal flowers, trimmed hedges and clipped shade trees. Framing the vista of the landscaped plaza with the skyline of Pittsburgh beyond are the Art Museum on one side and the Symphony Hall on the other. The Symphony is approached through a series of dramatically expanding spaces. The entrance vestibule, containing ticket offices and connecting to the garage beneath, opens into a spacious foyer off which are cloak rooms and rest rooms. In the center of the foyer is a stairway of grand proportions leading to the symphony Hall level and gently ascending over an ebony colored reflecting pool. Through the well of the stairway is seen the soaring space of the promenade surrounding the Symphony Chamber itself. The promenade is a glass walled space of monumental dimensions — one hundred feet wide, three hundred feet long with a ceiling height of seventy feet. From this promenade can be seen the whole of the Golden Triangle with the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers framed by the hills beyond...

The form of the Symphony Hall is simple and strong in appearance. The structure is of reinforced concrete clad in Roman Travertine. The roof is a vast cellular like mass supported by twelve gigantic columns. The connection between the columns and the roof is a bronze pin so that the roof seems lightly poised on the columns. Beneath the roof and set back are brown tinted glass walls framed in bronze.

By day these walls become a dark brown mirror framed in travertine reflecting the surrounding landscape; by night, a softly glowing amber film revealing the rich and spacious interiors of the Hall. The huge columns, cruciform in shape, rest on the garden covered podium. One story above the podium is a terrace running the length of the podium and penetrating the space be-

tween the columns. This terrace is at the level of the main promenade (orchestra-level) of the Symphony Hall. This terrace forms a unifying horizontal element to give a strong relationship between the Art Museum, the Symphony Hall and the apartment house.

Across the main entrance rotunda from the Symphony [Hall] is the Art Museum. The Museum has three levels and a roof garden. The entrance level is taken up with galleries, the administrative offices, and the school of the Museum. The upper level consists of a pavilion opening onto the terrace of the Center for the Arts. In this pavilion is a large restaurant and facilities for museum members....The roof of this pavilion is a large walled sculpture garden with openings revealing views of the city.²²

The Failure of the Center for the Arts

Heinz's offer of \$8 million for the construction of a symphony hall in 1961 was contingent on a commitment from the city to develop a full "Center for the Arts" and more importantly, to clear a large part of the residential area east of Crawford Street known as the Upper Hill. "Not a nickel will go for a symphony hall or anything else until... something is done with [those] 50 blocks..." a top official of a top unspecified organization was reported as saying.²³ A report in the *Pittsburgh Press* took the progression of redevelopment planning to its logical conclusion: successful redevelopment would only be accomplished by clearing the entire Hill District. Sounding like a description of a military maneuver, a photograph accompanying the report was captioned "development of the Lower Hill as a cultural center could mean a real Renaissance for Pittsburgh, if its flanks are protected — perhaps to Oakland."²⁴ Some even suggested that the whole Renaissance would come to a halt if the Upper Hill and its residents were not removed.²⁵

From the very beginning, organizations involved in the Renaissance understood that the relationship of the Lower and Upper Hill would present problems to developing the cultural center. An artist's impression of the Lower Hill project drawn from the Allegheny Conference plan of 1953 shows development as far as Devilliers Street in the Upper Hill (see figure 1), a full block further into the Hill than was actually cleared. Later, a more explicit URA memorandum considered "protection (of sorts) for the [Melody Tent Lots] area redevelopment with cultural institutions."²⁶ The URA presented three ways to accomplish this "protection": clearance of an unspecified area east of Crawford Street and creation of a public park; construction of a new residential area and the arrangement of the buildings and appurtenant recreational space in such a way as to create a break between the cultural area and the poor

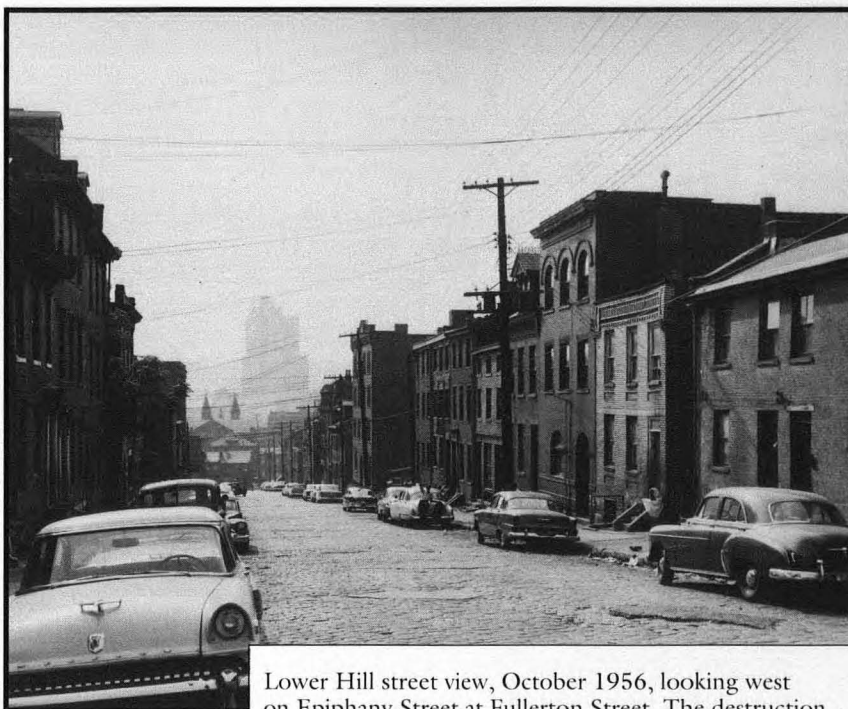
A Pittsburgh newspaper report concluded that a cultural center would succeed only if 'its flanks are protected — perhaps to Oakland.'

housing in the Upper Hill; and building a wall along the westerly line of Crawford Street. The URA memo in which these suggestions were made clearly points to a plutocratic planning process in which little thought was given to those to be affected in the Hill District.

In essence, a cultural center paid for and patronized by the richest and most powerful residents of the metropolitan area would not be built next to what these groups considered a slum. The *Pittsburgh Press* reporter who wrote the article accompanying the photograph mentioned above wrote that "the people most needed [for financial donations] want to make certain that the proposed cultural center is not built next to a seething slum; they want renewal for the Upper Hill to protect their donations."²⁷

However, a publicly owned cultural center is not like a privately owned piece of real estate. Its value is not linked, at least in the short run, to the appreciation of property values, which concern private speculators, nor to its taxable value, the concern of local government. Rather, its value is linked to the prestige it brings to the city, especially to the growth potential of that prestige, and to the more specific enhancement of the value of surrounding private real estate. To generate prestige for the city, a cultural center has to stage top-rate productions and, in the long run at least, break even in the process. The latter requirement means events have to be well attended by the public. However, the proximity of a slum to a cultural center is likely to have a detrimental effect on attendance. The slum dents the perceptions which middle- and upper-class people (the majority of fine arts patrons) hold of their lives. People dressed in their finery to attend a symphony performance do not want to be visually confronted by squalid poverty. Moreover, there is the real or imagined physical danger which a slum presents to arts patrons. A *Pittsburgh Press* reporter quoted one potential arts center patron as saying, "I'm not going to take my wife up there for a concert and run the risk of her getting hit by a bucket of garbage."²⁸ Even if such incidents never occur, prestige is tarnished by the visual contradiction of the city's finest and most squalid buildings being located next to each other.

In terms of actual value, the development of the arts center was important to protect the value of surrounding private projects. In the mid-1960s, the Allegheny Conference argued that the importance of the center extended beyond the improvement of Pittsburgh's cultural environment. A confidential report circulated among members of the conference noted that just as

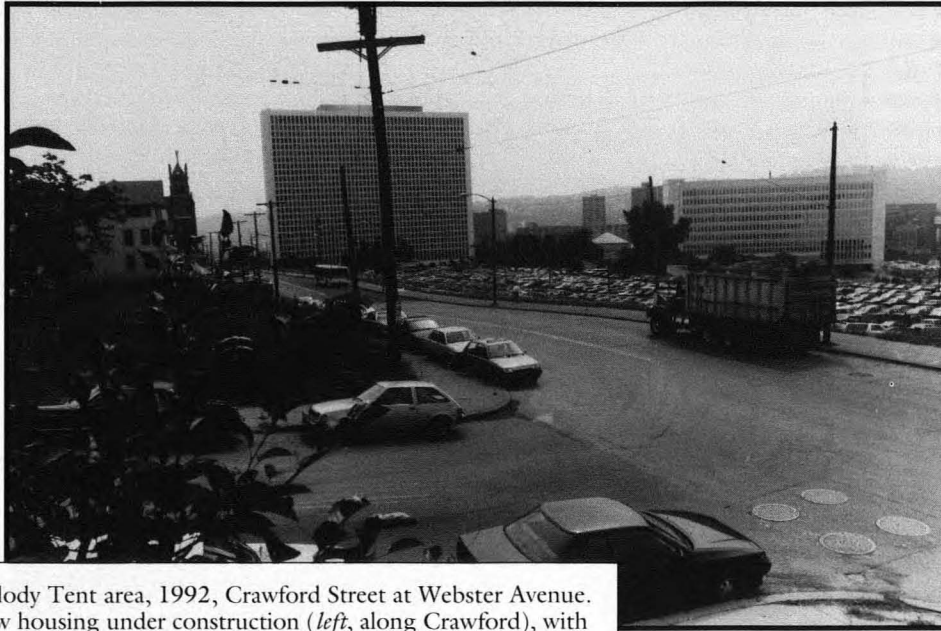


Lower Hill street view, October 1956, looking west on Epiphany Street at Fullerton Street. The destruction occurred without alternative housing for those displaced — mainly poor renters. One study in the early '60s found Pittsburgh had the worst shortage of low-income housing among the 14 largest U.S. metropolitan areas. The stream of people uprooted by the failed arts center project stimulated several new low-income neighborhoods — in parts of East Liberty, Hazelwood, Wilkinsburg, Homestead, and Beltzhoover.

Gateway Center and Mellon Square developments had rehabilitated large tracts of real estate downtown, the Lower Hill's arts center and symphony hall would have a similar reclamation effect. This reclamation effort and the direct link to the success of private projects is demonstrated by the Washington Plaza Apartments.²⁹

A luxury tower apartment complex, the apartments were to be developed by Webb and Knapp, Inc., which won the contract over four other bidders. The firm's winning proposal included three residential towers to accommodate 935 households, but only one was built. One author who studied the project contends that the 1962 bankruptcy of Webb and Knapp's affiliate, Zeckendorf developers, forced cancellation of plans for the two other towers.³⁰ This is untrue, however. Far from being aborted, the Washington Plaza Apartments were taken over by Alcoa, which had every intention of carrying through with the project but later gave up on the project because redevelopment agencies did not clear more of the Hill District. Leon Hickman, vice president of Alcoa, made this much clear in a 1966 letter to Robert Pease, executive director of the Urban Redevelopment Authority:

Our faith in the future of the project is as strong as ever



Melody Tent area, 1992, Crawford Street at Webster Avenue. New housing under construction (*left*, along Crawford), with the Washington Plaza Apartments (*center*) and Civic Arena parking (originally slated for cultural center development). The Civic Arena, below the parking lot, is not visible here.

if [the URA] can go ahead with the Upper Hill and the Music Hall. If the Music Hall is not built it will delay our plans; but if the Upper Hill is not to be improved in a major way, it will stop us in our tracks. Consequently we want to do everything we can to help you get both these projects underway as soon as possible.³¹

And it was the apartment project and the cultural center's dependence on clearance of the Upper Hill that spawned further redevelopment plans aimed at the Hill District in the 1960s.

Renewal Planning for the Upper Hill

Creating a "modernized city core" had always been one of the motivations for redevelopment in the Upper Hill. However, it was not until the late 1960s, with the desire to move forward on construction of the Center for the Arts, that concrete plans began to form. The Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association was the first to commission an area study, its stated purpose being to analyze the relationship between Oakland and the Golden Triangle.³² The study reiterated the argument that the Hill presented a major barrier to development, and suggested that a major boulevard be built through the center of the Hill to tie Oakland with downtown, to promote renewal and to improve real estate values in the entire Hill. Renewal — in this suggestion, a boulevard — would again involve clearing out residents.³³

The planning group's study was the last of a type of plan for the area that now seems characteristic of the first period of the Renaissance. The city's planning department unveiled its intentions for a major new thoroughfare in meetings with neighborhood groups in early

1963. By this time, the political climate surrounding urban renewal had begun to shift, and planners were cautious in their presentations, stating that their proposal was tentative, unlikely to come to fruition for several years, and that they were willing to modify plans to meet neighborhood needs.³⁴ Such caution shows that public planning agencies were no longer prepared to charge headlong into projects based on private sector suggestions for urban redevelopment.

This shift was brought about in large measure by the Lower Hill project, which dramatized the prob-

lems associated with urban renewal and the provision for low-income housing, especially for blacks. Toward the end of the 1950s, Pittsburgh's housing problem had intensified to crisis proportions. Slum destruction without significant construction of new low-cost units had led to a reduction in the new supply of such housing. In 1960, Pittsburgh ranked worst among the 14 largest U.S. cities in the percentage of housing units occupied by non-whites and classified as deteriorating or dilapidated dwellings.³⁵ While the majority of those people relocated from the Lower Hill found better housing, at least in the short-run, they almost invariably had to pay higher rents. In addition, large sections of the Upper Hill began to deteriorate as over-crowding increased and fears on the Hill of further clearance dissuaded proper maintenance of properties.³⁶ Moreover, elimination of a large section of predominantly African-American housing, coupled with racial and income barriers in the housing market, increased racial segregation. In 1950, half of the city's black households were located in areas which contained 50 percent or more non-white households; by 1960, this ratio had risen to almost 7 out of 10.³⁷ This situation was evident to all involved in the renewal program, and even though redevelopment agencies stressed their flexible position on plans for the Upper Hill, there was an almost immediate outcry from black leaders.

The *Pittsburgh Courier* charged the planning department with attempted "brainwashing" aimed at guarding against the possibility of an "explosion from fears of uprooting hundreds and hundreds of people."³⁸ Rather than a nebulous plan which sought partial rehabilitation of the Hill District, the *Courier* argued that the planning department had very definite plans aimed at renewing the residential area for middle- and upper-income families; said the *Courier*: "New Hill Will Have New

Faces.”³⁹ Such outspoken and immediate opposition made it increasingly likely that the redevelopment coalition’s plans would not proceed without problems, and without the cooperation of Hill residents. Indeed, the Renaissance’s vaunted “public-private coalition” began to splinter as the public sector redefined its role in response to newly activated political constituencies. It was at this time, early in 1963, that the Citizens Committee for Hill District Renewal, an umbrella group representing 40 organizations, was formed.

This activism and organized opposition to the “top-down” planning process, and the burgeoning civil rights movement, forced city agencies to approach neighborhood renewal in a new way. Thus, in 1964, the city planning department presented some different programs: rather than destroying “blighted” buildings and removing the occupants, the new programs aimed to link urban renewal with other federally aided anti-poverty programs.⁴⁰ Instead of razing buildings, the new proposals seemed intended to improve health, education and employment conditions. Even the newspapers responded to the message that city planners and Mayor Joseph Barr were communicating. The *Pittsburgh Press* editorialized:

You don’t just uproot families — no matter what kind of hovel they live in — and replant them. This is true even if the new housing is “safe,” “adequate,” and “sanitary,” as Uncle Sam requires in his redevelopment projects. There are too many human, economic and social problems which must be resolved well ahead of relocation and redevelopment.⁴¹

City planning agencies and the Hill District’s renewal committee began cooperative ventures in 1964 aimed at short- and long-term improvements. A campaign to clear the Hill of garbage was initiated and a survey to determine the exact nature of the problems in the Hill was conducted with surveyors from both the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the Hill District committee.

Slow-moving attempts to improve the Hill rather than bulldozing did not solve the basic problem which hindered the construction of the cultural center — its “protection” from the slum. Since clearance of the population was not possible, then another “protective” measure became necessary. The URA had suggested as early as 1956 that the buildings of the arts center complex be used as a physical barrier to the blighted areas of the neighborhood. And it was this eventuality that concerned the Hill District committee. With clearance plans thwarted, at least temporarily, the Hill community did not want to be “caught behind...a cultural Chinese Wall.”⁴² The Hill’s renewal group

argued that instead of a cultural center on the Melody Tent Lots, apartment towers that permitted “fingers of light” between downtown and the Hill should be built. (see figure 3) Although not fully committed to apartment buildings, the committee wanted development which would help merge the two areas — the Hill and downtown — not development which would cause a drastic break. In addition, the committee’s proposal, drawn up by a planner from the Department of Architecture at Carnegie Institute of Technology, called for widening sidewalks, planting trees and rehabilitating much of the housing in the Hill.

In the three years that followed the 1965 proposal, little progress was made on any side. The cultural center and Washington Plaza Apartments were no closer to construction, and social and economic conditions in the Hill changed little. It finally took resentment in the black community catalyzed by Martin Luther King’s assassination to end the deadlock. The riots which took place in the Hill between April 4 and 7, 1968, were mild in comparison to those in other cities but nevertheless had wide-ranging effects.

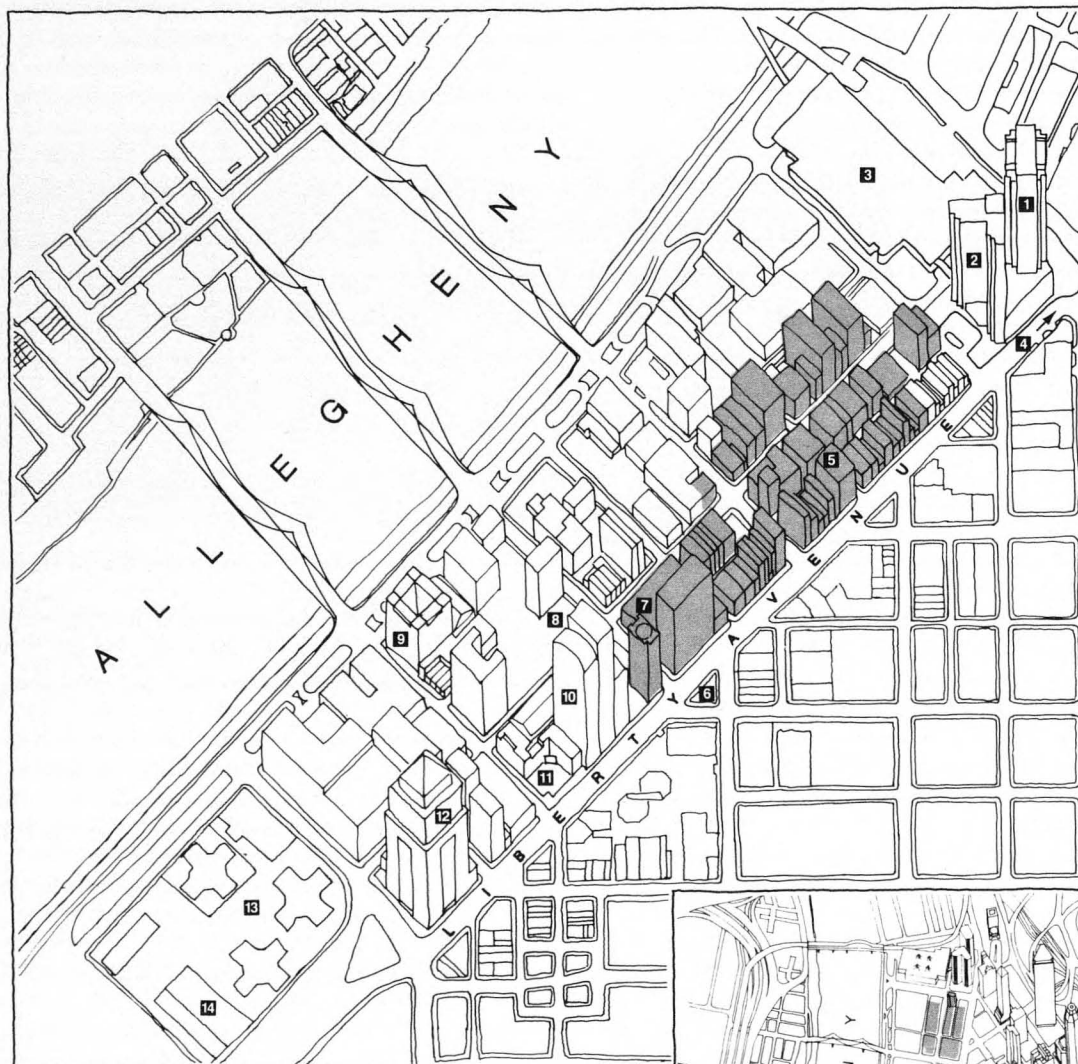
Soon after the riots ended it was reported that hopes for a cultural center in the Lower Hill were on the verge of extinction. Business elements in the civic coalition did not entirely give up on the arts project, but they began to look for “safer” locales. This invariably meant redirecting investment back to the heart of downtown. The Howard Heinz Endowment purchased the downtown Penn Theater for the Pittsburgh Symphony and renamed it Heinz Hall. Much later, in 1981, the convention center, proposed two decades earlier in the cultural center alongside the Civic Arena, was completed several blocks from the arena, in the heart of downtown; it was named for Pittsburgh’s “Renaissance Mayor,” David L. Lawrence.

As for the Washington Plaza Apartments, only one tower out of three (as noted earlier) was ever completed. Alcoa realized there were severe problems with erecting plush units near an area in desperate need of low-income housing. Such social concern, however, was outweighed by the fact that in the five years after the first tower had opened it was never fully occupied. The opposition of local residents to the complex became more radical after the riots. An official of the United Negro Protest Committee said, “I swear to God that you will be sorry if any more of the Lower Hill is devoted to construction

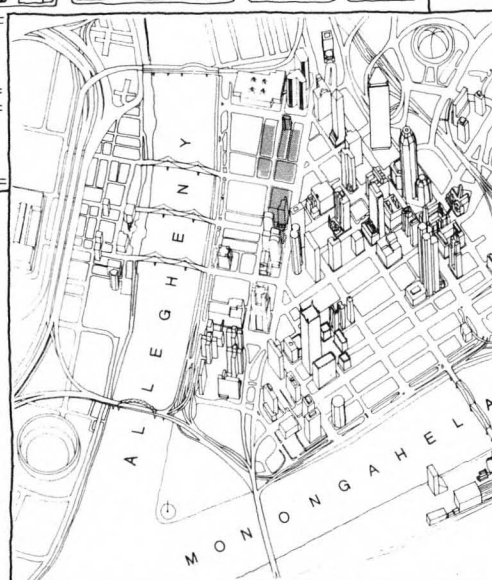
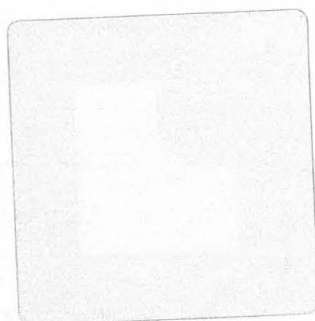
of housing for the affluent society.” Militant residents of the Hill labeled Crawford Street “the end of the line” for any more urban renewal in their neighborhood. Further development could only come with their consent.⁴³

Since the turbulent 1960s, no comprehensive rede-

**Hill District
leaders worried
that arts complex
buildings would
leave their
neighborhood
behind ‘a cultural
Chinese Wall.’**



- 1 Federated Investors Tower
- 2 Vista Hotel
- 3 Convention Center
- 4 Penn Station Restoration
- 5 Historic District
- 6 Subway-Cultural Stop
- 7 Benedum Center for the Performing Arts
- 8 Future Park
- 9 Fulton Theatre
- 10 CNG Tower
- 11 Heinz Hall and Plaza
- 12 Fifth Avenue Place
- 13 Gateway Center
- 14 Hilton Hotel



■ Penn-Liberty Historic District

Pittsburgh's downtown Cultural District

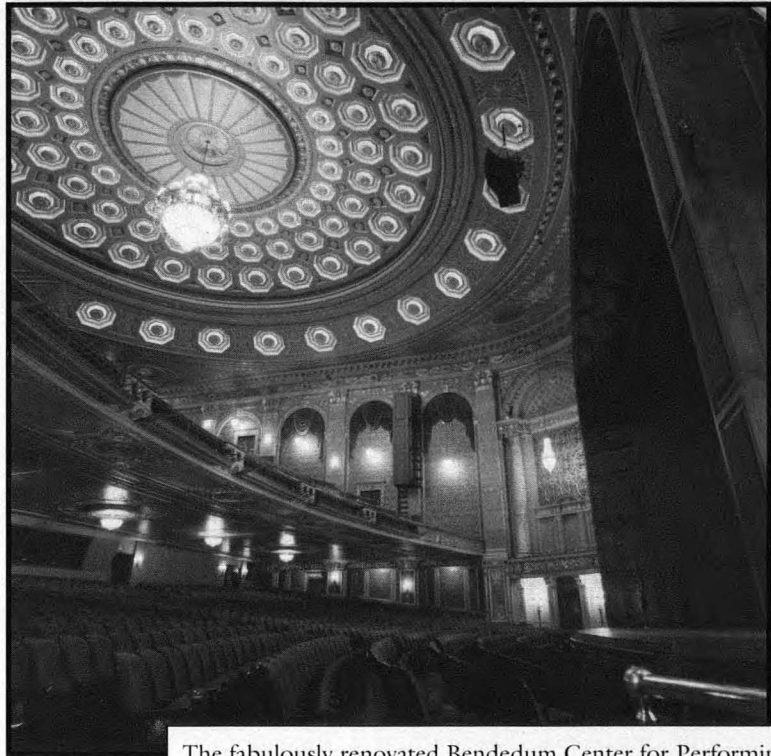
velopment project has been seriously considered. The Upper Hill immediately to the east of Crawford Street is still occupied predominantly by poor blacks. On the other side of Crawford Street, to the west, the Melody Tent Lots serve as a parking lot for the Civic Arena and the central business district. Now, as with the symphony hall and convention center, the plan for a cultural district in Pittsburgh has shifted to the downtown core.

Conclusion

The failure to complete the Center for the Arts was the result of contradictions embedded in the redevelopment project. These contradictions included the fact that although a good deal of time and money was focused on building a cultural center to serve middle- and upper-class Pittsburghers, low-income housing was badly needed, nowhere more so than in the Hill. And further, although powerful people in the city wanted to build places for "highbrow" entertainment in the Lower Hill, to be successful such buildings could not be constructed next to the city's poorest neighborhood. Monied interests would not invest in such a project, and the Hill's residents would not allow the remaining part of their community to be destroyed, nor allow an arts center to complete the physical and symbolic separation of downtown and the Hill.

Today, the Civic Arena and its parking lot remain the physical artifacts of plans for a cultural district on the Hill. These artifacts have much to teach us about the past, and perhaps as a failure the Center for the Arts reveals more about Pittsburgh's Renaissance history than the various successes of the period. In particular, the arena and its parking lot illustrate the skill of private and public Renaissance architects to realize the many paper proposals and visions for the "new" Pittsburgh. Further, they reveal that although business and government leaders have an enormous influence on the urban landscape, it is true that the struggles of ordinary people also influenced what we see today. Indeed, by refusing to give up the remaining part of the Hill District, the residents and their community organizations significantly altered the process of city redevelopment. It is this fact which can easily be forgotten by focusing on downtown parks and skyscrapers as the monuments of the Renaissance. The Civic Arena parking lot has its legacy as well.

Three decades after its dedication, the Civic Arena is a popular venue. Yet, the arena's poor acoustics limit its range of events to mainly popular music concerts and sporting events. The city-wide shortage of performance space has been well-publicized. As one can see by driving along Liberty Avenue downtown today, several



The fabulously renovated Benedum Center for Performing Arts in Pittsburgh's new downtown Cultural District.

public and private organizations believe the time is ripe for the successful development of a new cultural district downtown. ■

¹ On the recent history of the cultural district, see H. Kloran, "The Art of the Deal," *Pittsburgh Magazine* (April 1990), 38-43, and "Pittsburgh Downtown Cultural District," Allegheny Conference on Community Development, Pittsburgh, 1987; on cultural districts nationally, see H.R. Snedcof, *Cultural Facilities in Mixed-Use Development* (Washington, D.C., 1985), especially 216-235, and J.A. White, "The Arts Coalition in Strategies of Urban Development," in C.N. Stone and H.T. Sanders, eds., *The Politics of Urban Development* (Lawrence, Kan., 1987).

² Based on a study by Economics Research Associates, 1983. Also see Snedcof, 225.

³ This information, part of a statement made by chamber representatives to City Council in 1955, was found in the files of the Allegheny Conference.

⁴ "Memorandum to Officers and Members of the Executive Committee Allegheny Conference on Community Development, Re. Lower Hill Center, July 12," by H.J. Heinz, 16, in Allegheny Conference files.

⁵ Interview with Robert Pease, 13, in Stanton Belfour Oral History Project, 1971, Special Collections, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh.

⁶ "Urban Authority to Clear Way for Slum Riddance, Rebuilding Here," *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, 3 Nov. 1946.

⁷ "The Pittsburgh Center," Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce,

October 1947, 6, Pennsylvania Room, Carnegie Public Library, Pittsburgh. Between 1914 and 1956, assessed valuations in the Lower Hill fell 45 percent, while assessed valuations city-wide fell 16 percent.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ On the URA's position, see its "Proposal for the Redevelopment of Area No. 3 in the Second and Third Ward of the City of Pittsburgh," 1955, 11, in URA files; on the Allegheny Conference view, see its "Lower Hill Cultural Center: Urban Redevelopment Area No. 3," 1953, not paginated, in Allegheny Conference files.

¹⁰ M. Weber, *'Don't Call Me Boss': David L. Lawrence, Pittsburgh's Renaissance Mayor* (Pittsburgh, 1988).

¹¹ The Allegheny Conference noted in 1949 that areas such as the Lower Hill could not be considered for an auditorium "because they are presently occupied by thickly built areas presenting a re-housing problem." Quoted in Weber, 418, note 22.

¹² In 1949, the major barrier to an auditorium was overcome when the federal government passed the National Housing Act. It allowed land to be bought by the city, cleared, and then sold to private developers for about 30 percent of the cost of acquiring and improving the land. In this process, the federal government would pay two-thirds of the city's loss. Consequently, the Lower Hill project was the first federally aided redevelopment project submitted to City Council and the first Pittsburgh project which involved a write-down paid from public funds (an amount equal to the difference between the cost of acquiring and clearing the land and the selling price of the land). URA op. cit., 1955.

¹³ "Full Dress' Glitter Planned for Hill," *Pittsburgh Press*, 25 Aug. 1950; on the final arts center plan submitted to council by URA, and designed by the Allegheny Conference, see URA, op. cit., 1955; the URA requested the Allegheny Conference to provide a definite plan, which was needed to qualify for federal grants and loans. See "Plans to Clear Hill District of Slums Speeded," *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, 4 Feb. 1952.

¹⁴ "Hill Redevelopment Area Perils Health, Robin Says," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 29 Apr. 1953; "Land Buying Going Fast in Lower Hill," *Pittsburgh Press*, 29 Apr. 1953; "Relocated Family is 'Glad to Move,'" *Pittsburgh Press*, 20 May 1956.

¹⁵ R. Lubove, *Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business and Environmental Change* (New York, 1969), especially chapter 6.

¹⁶ "Dedication: A Time To Pause," *Greater Pittsburgh* (1961), 21.

¹⁷ The regional planning association's proposal, made public in 1947, called for an 18,000 seat, 110,000-square-foot arena/auditorium, the "Pittsburgh Center" (forerunner of the Civic Arena). In the \$15 million facility, space was allotted for light opera and theater. See Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce op. cit., 1947; "Pittsburgh Plans Municipal Center and Sports Arena," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 30 Oct. 1947. Ironically, these early plans called for a large parking lot on the ground that is now the Civic Arena parking lot.

¹⁸ "Center for the Arts," *Pittsburgh Press*, 10 June 1960; "Arts on the Hill," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 10 June 1960.

¹⁹ "Memorandum to Arthur B. Van Buskirk," (an aide and confidant of Richard Mellon), by H.J. Heinz II, 10 May 1963, 3, Allegheny Conference files.

²⁰ Ibid., 3-4.

²¹ Ibid., 4; for details on the underground parking lot, see "Memorandum, Re: Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," by Skidmore, Owing, and Merrill, 4 Feb. 1963, Allegheny Conference files.

²² Skidmore, Owing, and Merrill memo, 2-5.

²³ "Renew Upper Hill, City Planners Told," *Pittsburgh Press*, 14 May 1961.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "12,000 Want to Escape Hill Slums," *Pittsburgh Press*, 13 Apr. 1964.

²⁶ "Environmental Relationships in Redevelopment Area No. 3, Lower Hill District," 3 Aug. 1956, URA files.

²⁷ *Pittsburgh Press*, op. cit., 14 May 1961.

²⁸ *Pittsburgh Press*, op. cit., 13 Apr. 1964.

²⁹ H.J. Heinz II wrote the confidential report. See Heinz, op. cit., 10 May 1963. When Webb and Knapp's proposal was accepted, it was noted that "environmental" conditions in the Upper Hill could be a problem. "Some of the apartment dwellers will have the congested Upper Hill area for their view," URA Executive Director Robert Pease pointed out. "This was a drawback in the Webb and Knapp plan, but we feel it is not a condition that will last." See "New York Firm Gets Hill Development," *Pittsburgh Press*, 13 Aug. 1959.

³⁰ F. Toker, *Pittsburgh: An Urban Portrait* (University Park, Pa., 1986), 235.

³¹ Letter from L.E. Hickman, vice-president of Alcoa, to Robert Pease, 31 Oct. 1966, URA files.

³² D.A. Wallace, "A Conceptual Critique of the Oakland and Golden Triangle Areas," Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh.

³³ Ibid., 15-16.

³⁴ "Hill District Renewal Is Outlined," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 11 Jan. 1963; "Hill Development Called Five Years Off," *Pittsburgh Press*, 5 Apr. 1963.

³⁵ Lubove, op. cit., 142.

³⁶ On problems associated with relocation, see Department of City Planning, Pittsburgh, *Community Renewal Program: Relocation Report—Social Aspects* (Pittsburgh, 1963), 71; on deteriorating housing and overcrowding, see "Good Areas Called Key to Development," *Pittsburgh Press*, 11 Jan. 1963.

³⁷ Dept. of City Planning, op. cit., 50.

³⁸ "City Mum on Planning for 'Upper Hill' Area," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 6 Apr. 1963.

³⁹ "'New Hill' Will Have New Faces," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 Apr. 1963; "'New Hill' Will Erase Landmarks," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 Apr. 1963.

⁴⁰ "Hill District Top Target for Renewal," *Pittsburgh Press*, 12 July 1964.

⁴¹ "Human Element a Moving Force on Hill," *Pittsburgh Press*, 15 July 1964.

⁴² "Hill Residents Seek Living Room," *Pittsburgh Press*, 10 Jan. 1965.

⁴³ "Alcoa May Not Finish Hill Area Apartments," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 4 Feb. 1965.