CIVIC ARENA
The Lower Hill District Redevelopment Project encompassed 100 acres, 1,300 buildings and 413 businesses, and displaced 8,000 residents.

HC L&A ACCD Collection, Box 33, Folder 4.
SAVE THE BUILDING, OR SAVE THE PEOPLE?
By Sala Udin

Fifty years ago, Pittsburgh city fathers uprooted 8,000 residents from the Lower Hill District and scattered them across the city to make room for a “cultural district” that would include the Symphony, the Ballet Company, and Civic Light Opera.

After executing this “urban renewal” project, amputating the lower half of the Hill District, the city fathers decided, “Oops, we made a mistake; we don’t want to put our cultural district there after all!” By that time, they had already begun construction of the intended new home of the Civic Light Opera, called the Civic Arena. So the rest of the cultural district plan was abandoned and this vast area of “urban renewed” land lay empty. Later the Washington Plaza Apartments—with no windows facing the Hill District—and the Central Medical Pavilion Hospital were built. To this day surface parking lots surround this area, from Fifth Ave. to Bedford Ave., and from Freedom Corner’s Crawford St. to Chatham St., encircling the entire 28-acre parcel.

The Civic Arena was a somewhat unique architectural design with its silver dome, which was to open for concerts under the stars. In fact, however, the dome was only open on rare, good weather days in summer, when it was not raining. There were very few open-air concerts in the history of the Arena, less and less over the years. Now the hospital sits vacant and the Penguins have built a new arena across the street on the site of the hospital. Also now, 50 years later, the vacant land accommodating a sea of parked cars has become some of the most valuable, undeveloped real estate in the city.

It sits centrally located in the heart of the city. It is near all the major arteries: I-579, I-279, I-376, Bigelow Blvd., Boulevard of the Allies, Fifth Ave., Forbes Ave., Penn Ave., Liberty Ave. It is immediately adjacent to downtown, the Strip District, the Convention Center, Duquesne University/Mercy Hospital, and just a stone’s throw from Oakland and the North Shore. It should be, in short, a developer’s dream. That is because there are no families to relocate (anymore) and the land is owned by the city and the county, so it could be made available on favorable terms.

If the Penguins are successful in putting together a financing package, this community will be presented with the most attractive development opportunity we have had in more than 50 years. This will be an opportunity to do much more than simply fill in a vast urban gap caused by an urban renewal mistake. Rather, it will be an opportunity to build a healthy organic neighborhood connection between the wonderful new Hill District neighborhood at Crawford Square and the rest of downtown. But this opportunity will rest entirely on getting rid of the original mistake itself, the Civic Arena. Unless we do that, streets will not be reconnected to downtown and the critical mass of residential and commercial building cannot take place. To put it simply, this wonderful development opportunity demands that we be willing to face the consequences of our own city’s past mistakes, not “preserve” them.

We are already hearing the desire by some historic preservationists to save the Civic Arena. Does any thoughtful Pittsburgher really believe that it is sound land use policy to have two arenas next door to each other? There is simply no way to argue that preserving the
Civic Arena, simply out of preservationist nostalgia, is an intelligent exchange for a truly once-in-a-lifetime development opportunity. The architecture may in some technical ways be unique. But there is no use for the building that could possibly compensate this community for the obstruction its continuing presence would be to a vibrant, renewed city neighborhood.

From the perspective of those of us who live in the Hill District, it is clear that after 50 years, most of the families uprooted from the Lower Hill have become acclimated to their new homes and would not likely return. However, there are many important healing and economic benefits that would come to the remainder of the Hill District from the new development. The city would make every effort to provide favorable financing so that Hill District residents, who want to make the investment, could become homeowners in the newly rebuilt Lower Hill District.

The development plans would provide contracting and employment opportunities for Hill District residents. Businessmen and women would have access to capital to open and operate businesses in the new development. This new development should provide the critical mass needed to assure market-based business district development, including retail, grocery, and the other normal amenities of a healthy city neighborhood.

Long overdue development is rebuilding parts of the Hill in Bedford Dwellings, the Middle Hill, and Oak Hill. The arena site would provide a tremendous opportunity to move toward the full revitalization of one of this city’s great historic neighborhoods. That’s what we really need to be doing “for old time’s sake.” And it would be the right thing to do for the future of our city.

Ed. Note: The first section is adapted from an op-ed piece the author wrote for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on May 28, 2002, when he was Pittsburgh Councilman for District 6.

Even though there were many side streets and alleys where people lived, the whole population orbited around the main streets of Wylie and Centre avenues, and Fullerton and Logan streets. The buildings were usually two- or three-story walk-ups built very close together. Most of the residents of the Hill District were renters. The absentee owners only reinvested back into the properties what was necessary to meet minimum sanitary codes.

In the 1950s the Pittsburgh City Council and Mayor David L. Lawrence decided to demolish the dilapidated housing known as the Lower Hill District to place the city’s cultural district there. Over 8,000 families, businesses, churches, and organizations were relocated.

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It was a crushing blow to a poor but thriving community.

Often the question is asked, “If the buildings were in poor condition and the people who lived in them did not own them, how can they lay claim to an area they did not own? Weren’t they better off to be moved to brand new public housing projects?”

White tenants were given the benefit of government subsidized programs that put them on a track toward home ownership and wealth accumulation. Red-lining kept black families from those opportunities and instead relegated to shiny, new public housing projects. But again it has been asked, “Shouldn’t they be glad to be out of the old, dilapidated tenements?”

No. A more humane urban redevelopment approach would have been to build new, affordable housing right there in the Lower Hill District and use the government subsidies to enable black families to become homeowners right in the community they created. Instead, we got the arena and parking lots.

While serving on Pittsburgh City Council in the late 1990s, a developer came forward with a proposal to build a slow-moving, Magnetic Levitation train to shuttle passengers who parked their cars in a 5,000-car garage on the site of the Civic Arena. I fought the proposal with all my might. The council discussions of the Maglev proposal often made me remember, in my childhood, the terror that ran rampant through our community as word spread that everybody was going to have to move because the city was going to tear the entire neighborhood “down to the ground.” Black residents, including my family, were moved to public housing (the projects), while white people were moved to privately owned, government subsidized homes in the suburbs and the outskirts of the city.

In 1997, as we were in the midst of raising money for Freedom Corner, we were reminded of the dark history of the fight waged by Hill District residents to stop the demolition from proceeding all the way to Kirkpatrick Street. In the late 1950s, a billboard was rented at the

**Attention:**

City Hall and U.R.A.

No redevelopment beyond this point!

C.C.H.D.R. NAACP Poor People’s Campaign Model Cities

Low income housing for the Lower Hill

**We demand:**

Mayor David L. Lawrence participates in a ceremonial commencement of the demolition of the Lower Hill District to make way for the Lower Hill Cultural Center.

ACCD Collection, Box 33, Folder 7.
corner of Centre Avenue and Crawford Street that read, in essence, “Not another inch.”

The bottom half of the historic Hill District community had been amputated and the remainder of the community was withering and hanging on for dear life. We fought the plan to build the Maglev because we wanted to preserve our options to one day be able to rebuild the amputated half of our community and reconnect it to the upper half, so as to resuscitate the whole Hill District community. It was clear that if a project like Maglev went forward, we would never get a chance to influence the development of the site in such a way as to reconnect it to the rest of the Hill District community. We feared it would further isolate the community and allow its eventual complete demise.

The Hill District was in the news a decade later when the Penguins/Isle of Capri Casino project was a contender for the Pittsburgh slots license. Another bidder, Don Barden, planned to build his casino on the North Shore. The Sports and Exhibition Authority (SEA), decided to award the winner of the casino license with the development rights to the Civic Arena site.

Even though Isle of Capri lost the casino bid, the SEA gave the development rights to the Penguins when the team considered leaving Pittsburgh.

So, here we are, at the start of yet another decade. Instead of a proposal for a Slow Motion Maglev or a Hill District casino, we have proposals from a few preservationists to save the Civic Arena in the interest of historic preservation, with no regard for the historic preservation of the people of the Hill District!

The Penguins are busy completing the construction of their new venue and have indicated their strong intentions to demolish the Civic Arena. The preservationists believe this is a good time to move forward with their agenda. But the Penguins know that the preservation of the Civic Arena would limit the economic potential of the development of the site, so they are determined to demolish the old dome and move forward with their development rights.

The Penguins and Hill District residents both want to demolish the Civic Arena and develop the site, but that may be where our common interests end. Recently elected City Councilman Daniel Lavelle is steeped in Hill District history and is determined to represent the best interests of the community that elected him to replace Tonya Payne.

The people of the Hill District deserve a chance to sit down and discuss the future development of the 28 acres. Some issues I think important to these talks are:

1. The Hill District community must be involved in helping to determine the development plan.
2. The Hill District Council representative Daniel Lavelle must be the voice of the Hill District community and its interests.
3. The street grid disrupts traffic flow and should be reconnected, if possible, all the way to downtown.
4. Residential development near Crawford Street must complement the new Crawford Square housing development.
5. As the development moves closer to downtown, it can become taller, with mixed commercial and residential development.
6. Minority contractors and businesses should play an important role.
7. There should be extensive inclusion of minority employment (especially Hill District residents) in the construction and the built environment.
8. A $3 million commitment made by Don Barden must be honored by the owners of the Rivers Casino.
9. Revenues from the finished development must be set aside for the future development of the Middle and Upper Hill District.
10. The mayor, county executive, governor, Sports and Exhibition Authority, and Urban Redevelopment Authority must support this development of the whole Hill District with as much vigor as they demonstrated in their support of saving hockey in Pittsburgh.

The preservationists are not our enemy. They are fighting for the principles they believe in. It is my hope that they will work with us for the preservation of the people of the Hill District as hard as they work for the preservation of a building! If the preservationists are really determined to save the Civic Arena, the offer I made while I was on City Council still stands. I will help them raise the money to disassemble the Civic Area, piece by piece, and reconstruct it somewhere in their neighborhood.

Sala Udin is the former city councilman representing the Hill District and is the current president and CEO of Coro Pittsburgh.

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A 1953 concept drawing shows the Lower Hill District redevelopment project and resulting Cultural Center.

ACCD Collection, Box 1, Folder F17

An architectural birds-eye-view of the Civic Arena.

ACCD Collection, Box 1, Folder F17
In 1992-1993 alone, the Arena featured an N.B.A. pre-season game between the Cleveland Cavaliers and the New Jersey Nets, Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus, Disney on Ice, the Harlem Globetrotters, Sesame Street Live, Stars on Ice, NHL hockey, Ice Capades, a tour of the World Figure Skating Champions, Lacrosse, the WWF, U.S. Hot Rod Camel Mud & Monster Truck Racing Championship, and Shrine Circus. These in addition to a myriad of musical performances.

Collection of Tom Rooney, graphics by Vance, Wright, Adams.