



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE

LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

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Exploring the Pittsburgh Bureau of Building Inspection Photographs

At the close of World War II, Pittsburgh stood on the cusp of a series of expansive urban renewal projects that would remake the city's landscape over the coming decades. Known collectively as Renaissance I, these initiatives intended to spur economic growth following the war, dramatically transformed several neighborhoods and dislocated scores of residents in the process. The flurry of building activity included the construction of the Gateway Center, Point State Park, and the Civic Arena.

The Pittsburgh Bureau of Building Inspection (BBI) Photographs provide a glimpse into the city as it existed on the eve of the Renaissance. Amounting to nearly 1,100 images, the photographs were taken by the inspectors during visits to houses and businesses across the city between 1939 and 1946. Many of the structures in the photographs had fallen into obvious disrepair and appear abandoned, but the collection was transferred by the BBI to the Detre Library & Archives without any accompanying contextual records, leaving some questions unanswered. What prompted the visit by the building inspectors? What violations were found? Were they ever resolved?

This lack of documentation is somewhat offset by the inclusion of two key pieces of



Inspector measuring a crack on a house at 2501 Wylie Ave. in the Hill District, August 16, 1940.

All images HMC Detre L&A, PSS 13, Pittsburgh Bureau of Building Inspection Photographs, 1939-1947



Parking lot near 40 Water Street, formerly located at the Point in downtown, September 8, 1941. Water Street disappeared from the map during the creation of Point State Park.



Woman standing in the doorway at 45 14th Street in the Strip District, September 24, 1943.



Detail of the Arcena Street photograph (below), with a view of the Armstrong Cork Factory.


information on the back of each print: a date and a location. Comparing these historical photographs to contemporary images of the same location reveals that many of these buildings no longer exist. In certain cases, particularly surrounding sites of future urban redevelopment projects, even entire streets have vanished.

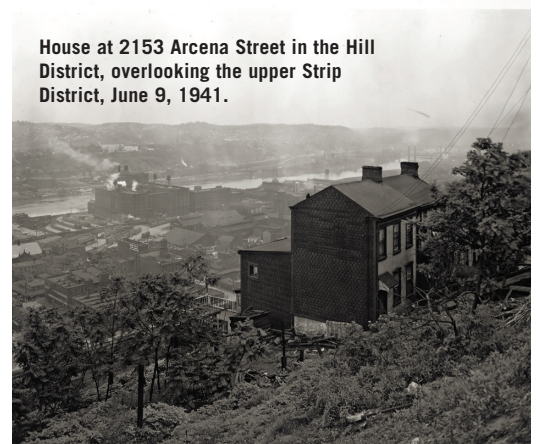
These images do not only depict areas of Renaissance-era change—many other neighborhoods, including Garfield, Larimer, Hazelwood, Manchester, and Troy Hill, are among the over 45 city neighborhoods represented within the collection. Images of these neighborhoods, especially from this period, can be difficult to find in other collections in the Library & Archives, making the BBI Photographs a particularly useful resource.

To encourage the use of the photographs by the widest possible audience, Library & Archives staff created high-quality digital scans of the photographs and have begun placing them online at the Historic Pittsburgh website. The website allows users to zoom in on the images, which reveals important details that are easy to overlook on the original print. For

example, an image of a house at 2153 Arcena Street in the Hill District, which overlooks the upper Strip District, contains a view of the Armstrong Cork Factory in the background. Magnifying the image offers clear views of an adjacent train yard, nearby businesses, and barges floating on the Allegheny River.

Along with buildings and landmarks, people can sometimes be seen in the images. The inspectors themselves appear in a handful of photographs, examining the building or the surrounding land. Occasionally the occupants are depicted, standing in doorways or gazing out the window, often looking backing at the photographer with a wary expression on their faces.

Stop by the Detre Library & Archives to view the entire collection of BBI photographs or visit the Historic Pittsburgh website at <http://historicpittsburgh.org/collection/pittsburgh-bureau-building-inspection-photographs> to see a portion of the digitized images. 



House at 2153 Arcena Street in the Hill District, overlooking the upper Strip District, June 9, 1941.



Men standing outside 40 Water Street, formerly located at the Point in downtown, September 8, 1941. Water Street disappeared from the map during the creation of Point State Park.