

Riots Long Ago, Luxury Living Today

High-end development has transformed some Black neighborhoods decades after they were scarred by unrest. And not by coincidence.



By Emily Badger and Quoc Trung Bui

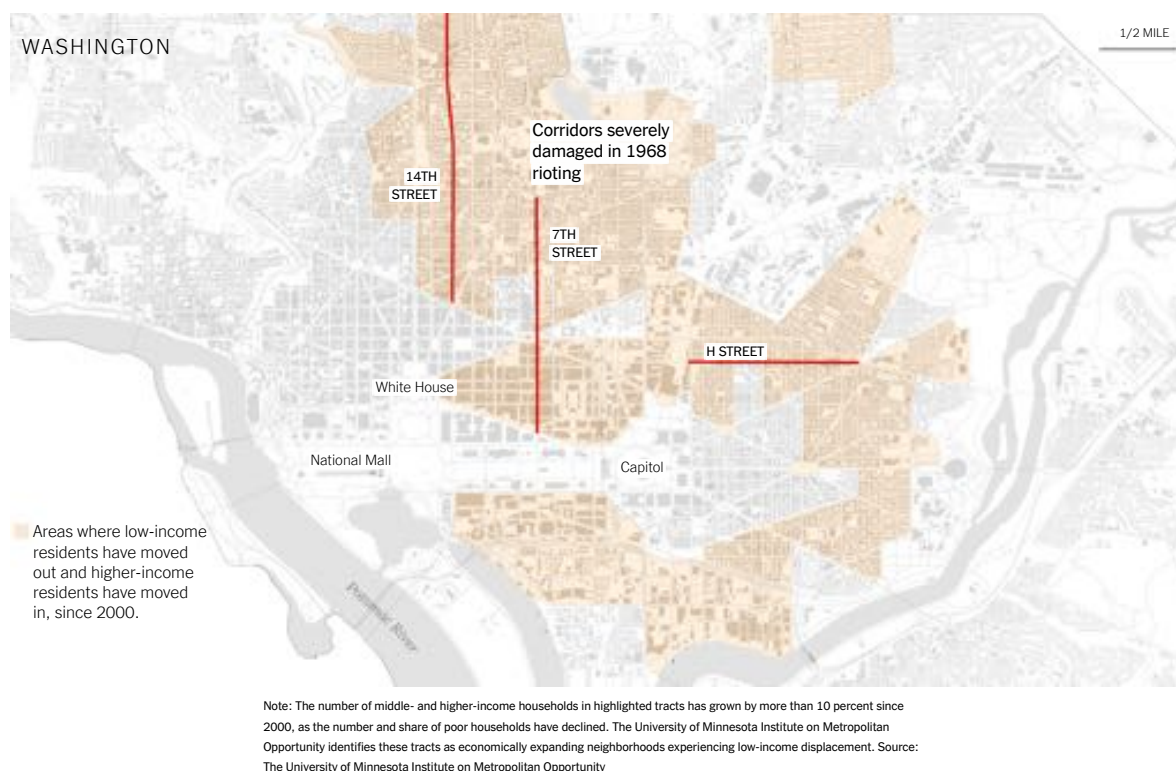
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WASHINGTON — At the corner of 14th and U Streets Northwest, where the anger first simmered in what became Washington's devastating 1968 riots, the going rent for a one-bedroom today is about \$2,500 a month. That sum buys concierge services, rooftop terrace access and proximity to any number of niche fitness studios.

In 1968, the intersection was the gateway to the city's segregated Black community, and it was home to several civil rights organizations. In the Southern Christian Leadership Conference office, in the days before the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, organizers had been planning his Poor People's Campaign.

That history clashes with what's in the area now: the modern luxury apartments, the Lululemon. Yet across Washington and in other American cities, high-end development rises directly on top of Black neighborhoods that suffered the greatest damage during civil unrest decades ago.

And there is an economic logic to it: The sheer scale of harm to Black neighborhoods — from the conditions that led to unrest, from the buildings that burned then, from the years of neglect that followed — made it easier, when the time finally came years later, for developers and new businesses and residents to amass wealth.



“You think of a forest fire, with the clearing of the land,” said Nizam Ali, whose family restaurant, Ben’s Chili Bowl, is one of the rare Black-owned businesses near 14th and U to survive the rioting and the decline afterward. “Unfortunately,” he said, “it was racism and murder that was the clearing of the land.”

It was redlining and segregation, then arson, depopulation, slumlords, the drug trade, overincarceration, inflated property taxes and denied home equity loans. Gentrification itself has become part of the critique in a new generation of protest over racial inequality precisely because it follows from this story in cities like Washington, and because it has brought its own set of encounters with police.

“Gentrification is on the tip of almost every Black person’s tongue,” said Willow Lung-Amam, a professor of urban studies and planning at the University of Maryland, who married into a native Washingtonian family. “People are deeply saddened about the loss of Black institutions, Black politics, and a Black place in the city. We can’t get through a Sunday dinner without talking about the city as the city that actually doesn’t exist anymore.”

There are similar conversations in Philadelphia, where apartments for college students have begun to fill the vacant lots on a strip with a storied jazz past that burned in 1964; in Miami’s Liberty City, where gentrification feels just over the horizon decades after 1980 riots; in South Los Angeles, where the Black population has declined significantly since the 1992 Rodney King riots.

“I think people feel that they have an absence of control of their community,” said Damien Goodman, an organizer in Los Angeles and the founder of the Liberty Community Land Trust, which aims to empower Black communities in the area.



Ben's Chili Bowl on U Street NW in Washington. “We had great Black neighborhoods and commercial districts,” said Nizam Ali, whose family has owned the restaurant since before the 1968 riots. Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Far more of the Black neighborhoods nationwide that experienced unrest, or the forces that drove it, have remained in decline than have gentrified. And past unrest is no required precondition for gentrification today. But the economics that turn destruction into opportunity are most visible in these places.

Many of these neighborhoods had bargain real estate, but also grand old housing stock, close to downtown, close to transit, with built-in commercial corridors. They also had vacant land and city-owned lots that could be assembled into larger developments.

And because entire communities had been devalued, it was possible to redevelop at the scale of entire neighborhoods.



A Whole Foods Market anchors a new mixed-use development that has transformed a stretch of H Street NE in Washington. T.J. Kirkpatrick for The New York Times

“If you devalue the whole area, you can redevelop the whole area based on a particular narrative of it,” said Brandi T. Summers, a professor of geography and global metropolitan studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her book “Black in Place” followed the transformation of H Street Northeast in Washington after the riots. The new narrative there of “cool” multiculturalism appeared in signs like “Chocolate City,” which was mounted, to quick criticism, over the chocolate display in the Whole Foods that opened in 2017.

‘Until that riot happened’

Rioting in the 1960s depressed the value of Black-owned property in central cities for years afterward. As a result, the racial gap in property values between white and Black homeowners widened more in cities with severe riots, according to research by the economic historians Robert Margo and William Collins.

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“As destructive as these events were, our interpretation of the large and relatively lasting impact of the riots on property values isn’t really a story just about the physical destruction of particular buildings,” Mr. Collins said.

Rather, he said, the destruction combined with expectations that these communities would remain risky places to invest or live in. The same pattern followed later unrest, like the 1980 rioting in Miami’s Liberty City, set off when an all-white jury acquitted police officers in the beating death of Arthur McDuffie.

“Liberty City was reeling even before the 1980 riot, but there was no specific association of the name ‘Liberty City’ with death, with race violence, with rioting,” said Marvin Dunn, a historian and professor emeritus of psychology at Florida International University, who went to elementary school in the neighborhood in the 1950s. “There was no sense that you should be afraid in Liberty City any more than anyplace else in Black Miami. Until that riot happened.”





Liberty City had long been the destination neighborhood for African-Americans pushed out of other parts of Miami. In the 1930s, a large segregated public housing project was built there. In the 1950s, when a highway was planned through the predominantly Black Overtown neighborhood to the south, white landowners in Liberty City rushed to build cheap rental housing for the crowds of renters they knew were coming. "Concrete monsters," those buildings came to be called.

Now 40 years after the riots, an effort to replace the public housing in the neighborhood with mixed-income development has made some residents nervous. And Liberty City's high ground, away from the coast, has suddenly enhanced its value in a city worried about sea-level rise.



Burned-out buildings in Miami after the riots of 1980. Bernard Charlon/Gamma-Rapho, via Getty Images

"We tend to assume that these poor neighborhoods are not places of investment," said N.D.B. Connolly, a historian at Johns Hopkins University who has also written about the area. "You look at the physical conditions, you think about the vacancies. But what is actually happening is one form of profit-making and speculation and capitalism is replacing another, with gentrification."

This cycle is clearer still in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood bordering downtown Cincinnati. Rioting erupted there in 2001, after 19-year-old Timothy Thomas was shot to death by a police officer.





Business leaders responded by creating a development corporation that bought and invested in deteriorating buildings in the neighborhood. Their work got underway at a moment when empty nesters and young professionals were increasingly looking to live near downtown. And in many ways, the earlier decline of the neighborhood facilitated its transformation.

Landlords who had catered to poor tenants with Section 8 vouchers sold their properties. And amid the decades of neglect, the city had never bothered to demolish old buildings dating to the earlier German settlement in the neighborhood.

“Disinvestment is fortuitous,” said David Stradling, a professor of urban history at the University of Cincinnati. “Cincinnati winds up with a collection of 19th-century buildings out of neglect rather than by purposeful preservation.”



Harold Hardy hauled construction debris out of a building that was being renovated on Vine Street in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood in Cincinnati in 2006. Tom Uhlman for The New York Times



Customers walked through the Findlay Market in Over-the-Rhine in 2017. Andrew Spear for The New York Times

The neighborhood has become a hub of condos and restaurants, a success story for the city's tax base and the neighborhood's population growth. But Over-the-Rhine has lost much of its affordability. And its identity as a Black community has faded in the revival of Over-the-Rhine as a historically German place.

Dorothy Darden, who has lived in the neighborhood for half a century, was a baby when urban renewal displaced her family from Cincinnati's Lower West End, a transformation that she dryly refers to as an "urban renaissance."

"I've lived through two of them," Ms. Darden, 63, said. "And neither one of them has benefited anyone that looks like myself, who doesn't have a big paycheck."

Opportunity after the fire

There is a lesson in another fire, the Great Boston Fire of 1872, of what can happen when urban land is cleared at a vast scale. That fire destroyed part of downtown Boston, at a time when the city was rapidly growing. The economists Richard Hornbeck and Daniel Keniston argue in an influential paper that the whole area was rebuilt in a way that it most likely wouldn't have been otherwise.

Instead of buildings being replaced one by one as they aged, there was widespread simultaneous reconstruction. Individual property owners were motivated to upgrade by all the other reconstruction around them. Land values rose in the burned area, and nearby.

The lesson, Mr. Hornbeck said, isn't that destruction necessarily leads to revitalization. Rather, it clears the way for whatever forces were already bearing down on a place.

"Reactions to these disasters tell you what was going on otherwise under the surface," Mr. Hornbeck said. "It gives people an opportunity to act free of certain constraints that they might have faced before."



Firemen amid the rubble after the Great Boston Fire of November 1872. FPG/Hulton Archive, via Getty Images

In Boston, the city's swelling population immediately put pressure on the area to rebuild. In Washington, that pressure did not arrive for decades.

When it finally did, all the same benefits of scale were at play. The 40,000-square-foot grocery store anchored the apartment construction, which enabled the restaurant scene, which gave developers still more confidence in yet more apartments.

"The whole is more valuable than the sum of the parts, because it's a neighborhood," said AJ Jackson, the executive vice president for social impact investing at JBG Smith, a large developer in Washington. "It's not a project, or a building, or a land island. You can create that ecosystem."

In this way, the city's history — not one single fire, but a long-running destruction, punctuated by widespread arson — made the particular kind of current development possible. History, Mr. Jackson said, "is constraining and it is creating opportunities at the same time."

After the riots in Washington, the city counted more than 250 lots where buildings had been entirely destroyed, primarily on the three main riot corridors. It wasn't until 2010 that these lots were as likely as other properties on the same streets to have a building on top of them, according to continuing research by the economists Leah Brooks, Jonathan Rose, Daniel Shoag and Stan Veuger.

"In the '70s, there's this huge disappointment, and then a huge disappointment now," said Professor Brooks, who teaches at George Washington University. "Then, it was that they didn't build anything. And now it's that they're building something in a way that isn't responding to what the community wanted."

When H Street finally began to redevelop, the last of the three corridors to do so, some relatively newer residents were vocal about what *they* wanted. Ben's Chili Bowl had planned to open another location on a street that felt akin to U Street. But in community meetings, some neighbors pushed back: They didn't want fast food, or carryout containers littering the neighborhood, or a noisy rooftop bar. The restaurant wound up opening in 2015, but it has struggled in its new home, amid competing ideas of what the corridor should become.

"We had great Black neighborhoods and commercial districts," Mr. Ali said, evoking a time before the fires, before the abandonment, before the reinvention. "If allowed to thrive, think of where these neighborhoods would be."

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