

THE



VIBRANT. DIVERSE. THRIVING. VIOLATED.

Just as this corner of Centre Avenue in Pittsburgh's Hill District has changed over the decades, so is the neighborhood being transformed by creative and committed individuals and organizations.

HILL

AMBITIOUS. CHANGING. BY LACRETIA WIMBLEY

he Hill District of Pittsburgh is more than just a place to which Terri Baltimore has dedicated the last two-and-a-half decades of her life. It is a place that has always drawn her, a place that always felt like home.

She can describe the groundbreaking history of the neighborhood's Freedom House Ambulance Service of the 1960s—the city's first mobile emergency medicine program, which became a national model for emergency medical transport and

care. She can share stories about actor Vin Diesel's grandfather who played for the Pittsburgh Crawfords Negro League baseball team in the 1930s. Ms. Baltimore recalls so much detail about the Hill District it's as if she transcended time and lived through much of its history.

"I've spent half my life here, and for the last 26 years, I've been rooted in this place," said Ms. Baltimore, a native of Pittsburgh's East Liberty community and director of

neighborhood engagement at the Hill House Association, a social services agency in the Hill District.

"I've worked at Hill House since 2007 as an employee, but from 1992 until 2007, I ran a program here to serve women in recovery. From 1985 to 1989, I worked for another organization that was based at the Hill House, and as a high school student, I came here to participate in other programs."

A neighborhood of rolling slopes overlooking Pittsburgh's Downtown, the Hill, as it is informally known, is still a beacon attracting interest locally for its historic legacy and current social and cultural activities, Ms. Baltimore said.

"I probably do anywhere between 30 and 40 tours a year for visitors, which consist mostly of people in Pittsburgh who have never been to the Hill," she noted.

But it is the Hill District's future, potentially foreshadowed by its prime real estate location and slowly changing demographics, that has community leaders and philanthropies like The Heinz Endowments and the McAuley Ministries Foundation partnering to ensure that longtime residents are able to participate in and benefit from revitalization efforts.

"There are 28 acres situated between Downtown and the Hill District, and depending upon your orientation, CEOs who see the site from their executive suites see it as an opportunity to expand the reach of Downtown," said Rob Stephany, the Endowments' director of Community & Economic Development. "Residents vividly remember the site as an important and integral part of their neighborhood. As parking lots transform into new things, like parks, office buildings and new housing, people are questioning, 'Is it built for us, or is it not built for us?'"

Like many Pittsburgh neighborhoods, the Hill District is steeped in a rich cultural history that provided a foundation for later generations to build on. In the 18th century, people of Chinese, Lebanese, Russian, German, Italian, Jewish and Syrian backgrounds populated the Hill with African Americans migrating from the South to the area in the early 19th century. The resulting ethnic hodgepodge would be a defining neighborhood characteristic for over a century.

1914

Before public housing was built in the Hill District, many lower-income and working-class residents lived in tenement buildings divided by common areas.

1932

Based in the Hill District, the Pittsburgh Crawfords baseball team was highly regarded in the Negro League and eventually had several National Baseball Hall of Fame inductees, including Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige and James "Cool Papa" Bell.

1946

The nightlife in the Hill District was legendary in the middle of the last century. Several venues, including the Roosevelt Theatre, showcased performances by jazz artists such as Duke Ellington, while restaurants like Stanley's Tavern provided food late into the evening.

1955

Wylie Avenue was a bustling thoroughfare in the Hill District that had thriving businesses and often served as the site for neighborhood parades.



Annie O'Neill

"I'VE SPENT HALF MY LIFE HERE, AND FOR THE LAST 26 YEARS, I'VE BEEN ROOTED IN THIS PLACE."

Terri Baltimore

Director of Neighbor Engagement,
Hill House Association



1914

Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System

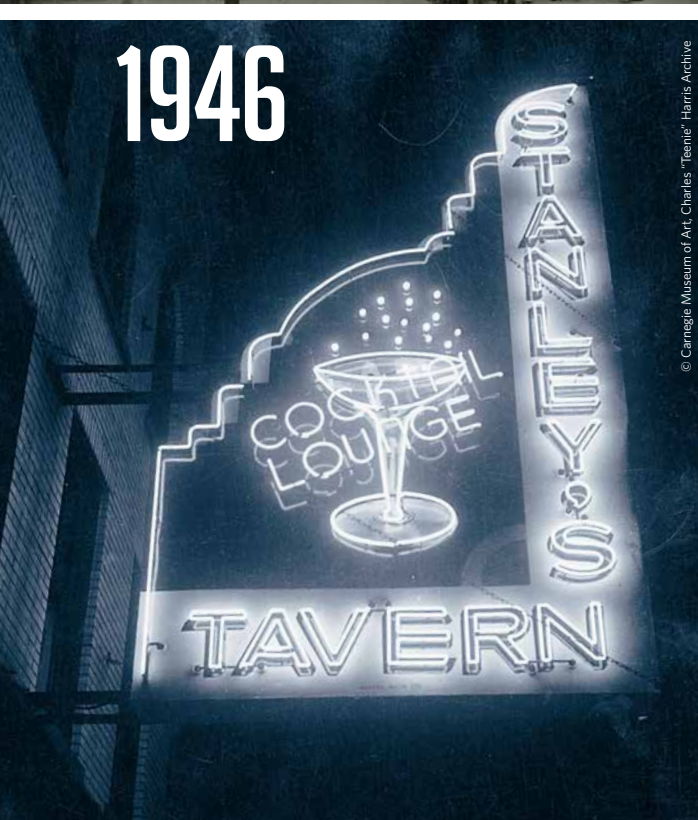


1932

Harrison Studio/public domain

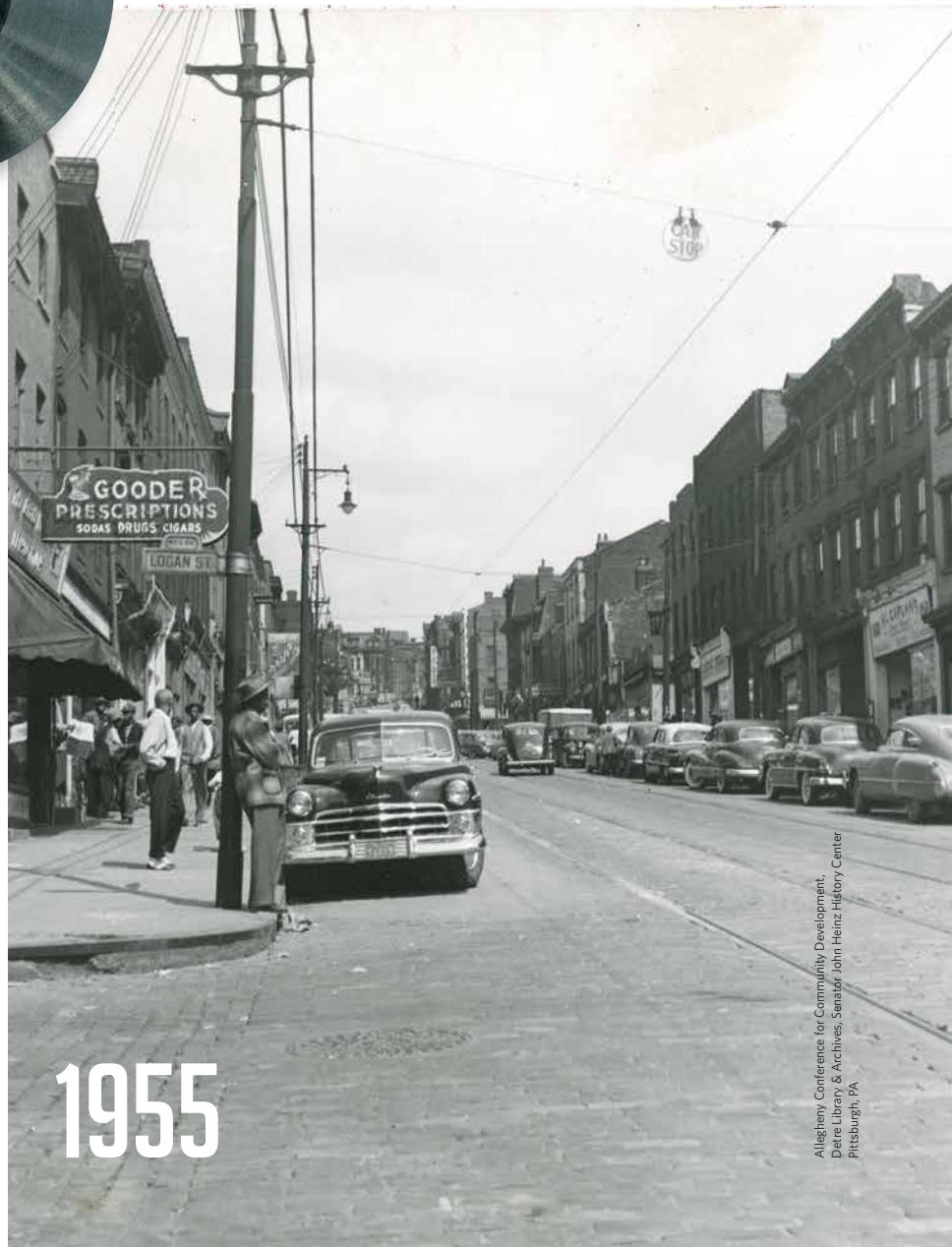


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1946

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1955

Allagheny Conference for Community Development, Dettre Library & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA

1960





Courtesy of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

1960

Construction of the Civic Arena wiped out much of the Lower Hill in the late 1950s and early 1960s, displacing hundreds of businesses and 8,000 residents. The arena would later be demolished, in 2010.

1968

Like many communities across the country, the Hill District experienced major rebellions after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The civil unrest devastated the neighborhood's business district.

1969

While still recovering from deep community losses created by Civic Arena construction and the unrest following the murder of Dr. King, Hill District residents took a stand against further demolition in the neighborhood, erecting a billboard to make their point.

1993

The Crawford Square residential development was built in the Hill District in the 1990s, beginning a wave of new home construction in the neighborhood.

2010

As the Civic Arena was being torn down, a new sports and entertainment venue was under construction across the street. Originally the CONSOL Energy Center, it opened in 2010 and was renamed PPG Paints Arena in 2016. The arena hosts a variety of events but is primarily known as home to the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey team.

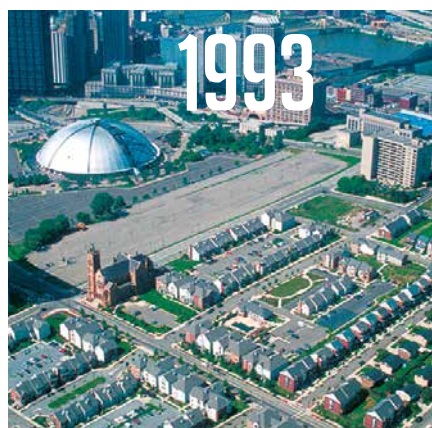
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1968



© Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles "Teenie" Harris Archive



1993



2010

LaQuatra Bonci Associates

The Hill District's transition into a predominantly African American community began with the Great Migration in the early 20th century, when somewhere between 1 million and 6 million African Americans fled the racial oppression and poor economic conditions in southern states. The Hill District saw an influx of thousands. Upon their arrival, many sought and obtained jobs in iron and steel mills in the city, and during the ensuing decades, the Hill District became the city's center for Black Nationalism and political advocacy.

By 1950, the population in the Hill District became increasingly African American, with other ethnic groups moving to different sections of the city and region. While some white-owned businesses and white residents remained in the neighborhood, the Hill solidified its place as a black enclave in the mid-20th century, gaining national and international attention for its cultural and entertainment offerings.

Its jazz scene came alive with well-known clubs like the Crawford Grill and Hurricane Lounge. These venues featured a vast array of artists, such as Lena Horne, Billy Eckstine and Mary Lou Williams. In addition to the Pittsburgh Crawfords, a premier Negro League professional

baseball team, the Hill also was home to The Pittsburgh Courier, for a time the nation's largest black-owned newspaper with a peak circulation of more than 350,000 copies; the city's NAACP and Urban League chapters; and many black churches.

The neighborhood's heyday ended in the 1960s. Like a number of African American communities across the country, the Hill District experienced the impact of civil unrest, such as major rebellions after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But the event identified as more profoundly devastating by many neighborhood residents was an extensive, yet short-sighted, redevelopment project. Some 8,000 residents were displaced and several hundred buildings were demolished in the late 1950s and early 1960s to make way for a municipal arena in the section of the neighborhood closest to Downtown known as the Lower Hill.

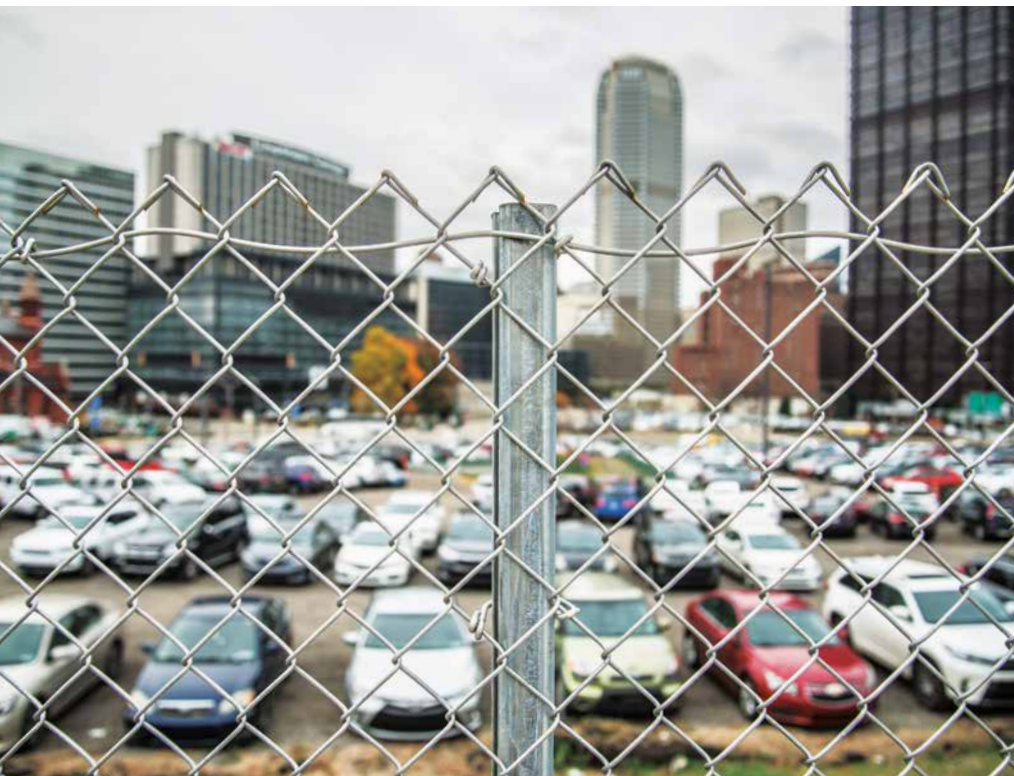
Many families were moved into public housing as part of one of the largest urban renewal efforts in the region. In 1962, the Civic Arena opened as an entertainment venue hailed for the architectural achievement of having at that time the world's largest retractable stainless-steel roof. Later it became home to the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey team.

But the Civic Arena's emergence on the city's landscape also marked the beginning of the Hill District's decline—and the intensifying of community efforts to protect residents and their interests that continues today.

"[The Civic Arena construction] represented all of what is negative in how you destroy a community," said Pittsburgh Councilman R. Daniel Lavelle, who was raised in the Hill District and now represents the community on City Council.

"It's a lesson on what not to do that lingers today. You still have people who remember living on that site, people who could tell you where on the Lower Hill they grew up, what businesses they used to frequent there, who their neighbors were... It's been a devastating shock to the psyche of not only the Hill District community but also of the African American community as a whole to know that your government could think so little of you that they would forcefully take your home, and literally cripple and destroy a neighborhood socially and economically."

In the late 1960s, the fight to prevent cultural and demographic loss involved residents refusing to allow further demolition in the neighborhood, a stand that



CIVIC DUTY?

The large parking lot that currently sits on the former Civic Arena site is an ongoing reminder that the Pittsburgh Penguins have yet to develop the property according to the team's agreement with the Sports & Exhibition Authority and the city's Urban Redevelopment Authority. So far, the only new construction on the 28 acres for which the Penguins have development rights has been the PPG Paints Arena and its surrounding infrastructure.

HOUSING BOOM

While commercial development has been lagging in the Hill District, housing construction has been on the upswing for more than two decades. Townhomes on Dinwiddie Street, top, and the Skyline Terrace development, bottom, reflect the variety of new housing in the neighborhood.

included erecting a billboard that said “No redevelopment beyond this point.” The Freedom Corner Memorial at the intersection of Centre Avenue and Crawford Street marks that resistance and other civil rights protests that followed.

Forty years later, the local Sports & Exhibition Authority and the city’s Urban Redevelopment Authority reached an agreement with the Penguins on development rights to 28 acres of land in the Lower Hill, which included redeveloping the Civic Arena site and constructing a new hockey arena.

Hill District community leaders insisted on inclusion in the discussions about the property and negotiated a community benefits agreement, the first of its kind in Pittsburgh. The 2008 accord called for \$8.3 million in financial resources for neighborhood improvement efforts in the Hill, a number of non-financial benefits, and a commitment that residents would have first priority for jobs connected to arena development.

Some visible progress has been made. Along with the construction of the PPG Paints Arena and new streets, sidewalks and underlying infrastructure, \$1 million was provided to help support construction of a nearby grocery store. Several hundred Hill District residents were hired for positions in the construction and ongoing operations of the new arena. Also, a creative tax sharing plan was crafted to set aside 50 percent of all new real estate tax revenue generated by new development for use in rebuilding a nearby historic part of the neighborhood. However, except for the new arena, the Penguins have yet to develop any other buildings on the 28 acres—the needed



trigger for the additional tax revenue from the site—and no new funding has been generated so far.

But even before PPG Paints Arena was built, the Hill District was beginning to transform.

In the 1990s, new housing development began with Crawford Square, a collection of apartments, townhouses and single-family homes located just above Freedom Corner. Residential construction continues to expand deeper into the Hill, and redevelopment over the past two decades of public housing that once defined some areas has

led to the construction of a variety of mixed-income housing complexes.

Although some of those moving into these homes have been African Americans who were existing residents as well as newcomers, the housing growth has altered the racial and socioeconomic demographics in parts of the Hill, forcing a number of long-term, low-income residents to relocate to other parts of the city and county. Community organizations, neighborhood leaders and current Hill District residents are now working with developers to ensure

that future development allows those living in the redeveloped areas to stay there.

As new homes were being built across the Hill, other capital projects begun or completed have been more community-focused, with the primary aim of benefiting those who made the neighborhood their home for years. They include construction of the Thelma Lovette YMCA, the Jeron X. Grayson Community Center, August Wilson Park and the Hill House Senior Services Center. Plans also are underway to redevelop the New Granada Theater, another entertainment venue that in recent decades has fallen into disrepair but once hosted jazz greats of the last century.

Since 2008, the McAuley Ministries Foundation has awarded \$12 million to these and other community improvement projects as well as out-of-school-time programs, and health and safety house renovations for low-income homeowners.

“We believe that the Hill District is an important and historic neighborhood that deserves investment to build and restore community assets,” Executive Director Michele Cooper said. “We have also invested in human and social services because it is equally important to invest in people.”

Among the other initiatives intended to preserve the community’s assets and support its people there is the res-

toration of the home of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson, a Hill District native who brought international attention to his former neighborhood, where most of his plays were set. Plans call for transforming the Wilson house into a cultural center for performances, exhibits and other activities.

And the Sports & Exhibition Authority has proposed an I-579 “Cap” Urban Connector

Project, connecting the neighborhood to Downtown. Plans include the creation of a park with artistic design elements paying homage to African American culture in the Hill District. With a commitment of \$19 million in federal funds, the park would be built between two bridges that cross over the highway adjacent to the neighborhood.

Still, Mr. Stephany of the Endowments, which has invested more than \$19.7 million in various Hill District projects and programs over the years, cautions that rebuilding the community requires a high level of intentionality and tactical action, even as the process moves slowly.

Mr. Lavelle, for example, noted that it is important for African Americans from the Hill District community to participate in the redevelopment of the former Civic Arena site in terms of both construction and investment.

And the Rev. Paul Abernathy, director of FOCUS Pittsburgh and an Orthodox Christian priest, said that while the different construction projects continue in the Hill, his organization is working to address deeper issues in the community. FOCUS—Food, Occupation, Clothing, Understanding and Shelter—provides services designed to heal residents of trauma caused by factors such as physical violence, mental health problems or community displacement that could make it difficult for individuals to find jobs, housing or simply have healthy mental/emotional lives.

If these problems are addressed effectively, Rev. Abernathy contended, they could change community outcomes on a larger scale.

Carmen Anderson, the Endowments’ director of Equity and Social Justice, said that though the Hill District still faces its challenges, the good will and enduring hope that exists stems from the people in the community.

“We sometimes struggle with a balance between what is, what was and what could be,” Ms. Anderson said. “It’s important that public-private partners keep their commitments so that progress for the community as a whole can be accelerated.

“But I believe there have been and will always be committed individuals and organizations in the black community—wherever we are—who are dedicated to ensuring that our children are safe, have places to play, have places to learn and grow, and the Hill is no exception.” **h**

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WE BELIEVE THAT THE HILL DISTRICT IS AN IMPORTANT AND HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD THAT DESERVES INVESTMENT TO BUILD AND RESTORE COMMUNITY ASSETS. WE HAVE ALSO INVESTED IN HUMAN AND SOCIAL SERVICES BECAUSE IT IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT TO INVEST IN PEOPLE.”

Michele Cooper executive director
McAuley Ministries Foundation



(RE) CONNECTING TO DOWNTOWN



The proposed I-579 “Cap” Urban Connector Project would connect the Hill District to Downtown and include the creation of a pedestrian park with artistic design elements honoring the neighborhood’s African American cultural heritage. With a commitment of \$19 million in federal funds, the park would be built between two bridges that cross over the highway adjacent to the community.

