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INSPIRED BY A 1950S PITTSBURGH RENAISSANCE CAPTURED IN PHOTOGRAPHS.

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AN ENDOWMENTS-FUNDED PROJECT BRINGS A NEW DOWNTOWN RENAISSANCE INTO FOCUS

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FOR A NEW AGE. BY DOUGLAS ROOT

In the early 1950s Pittsburgh, the Allegheny Conference on Community Development was the power center for the city and the region. The men (all men and all white in those years) included CEOs of Pittsburgh-based corporations, elected officials, and education and civic leaders. A few on the conference Executive Committee also were budding philanthropists.

This serious group had taken on one of the most significant urban redevelopment programs in the country's history. It changed so many areas of city life that it was later named the "Pittsburgh Renaissance," the first of several the city would experience in the next 60 years. The leaders who conceived Renaissance I were ambitious, impatient with delay and no-nonsense in decision making. They gloried in project blueprints and thick reports on issues such as housing, zoning and public health. They also weren't afraid to confront politicians and labor leaders in those classic smoke-filled rooms.

So it was nothing short of astounding that this elite group embraced something that had little to do with the business of building. Talented photographers were unleashed throughout the region to document the dramatic physical changes and the new patterns of daily life. The stated goal of the Pittsburgh Photographic Library, the name for the project headquartered at the University of Pittsburgh, was to educate the region and the nation using Pittsburgh as a sterling example of the great benefits that come from comprehensive urban planning.



JIM JUDKIS

Cutting corners: More public spaces and a surge in the number of people making their homes downtown combine to create new traffic patterns and new ways of interacting in an urban environment. This winter 2008 image of a lone figure crossing Katz Plaza in the late afternoon on a path marked by hundreds of snowy footprints was taken from the top floor of the adjacent Century Building during its renovation. The building is the first in a flurry of mostly high-end residential developments downtown to be marketed specifically to moderate-income renters. All 60 units were rented within a month of its opening last summer. The 23,000-square-foot plaza, which opened a decade earlier, replaced a parking lot and adult book-video store.



MELISSA FARLOW

Child-friendly downtown: Lucia Stevik-Brown, who was 5 when this image was made in the summer of 2008, embraces the fountain at PPG Plaza. The water feature that turns into a skating rink for winter humanized the plaza of the Philip Johnson–designed PPG Place after criticism that the one-acre space was “so lacking in warmth it would make a perfect setting for firing squads.” Now one of the most popular downtown gathering spots for lunchtime and weekend crowds, planners are hoping for a similar reaction to the \$5 million renovation of adjacent Market Square, the oldest public space in the city. The plan calls for a leveled four-quadrant layout in the style of a European piazza. There will be new shade trees, tables, wider sidewalks and decorative stone surfaces to lure people to cafés and restaurants.

RICHARD KELLY

Flag girls in the 2008 Labor Day Parade: While many other cities have lost their place as the staging ground for all sorts of public celebrations and convenings, Pittsburgh’s core has grown in popularity as the regional host for such events. A jump in residency, an unprecedented development boom and new offerings in the nationally known Cultural District are the magnets drawing fresh crowds and younger participants. The flag girls are performing at the corner of the Boulevard of the Allies and Grant Street as they carry an Amalgamated Transit Union, Local 85 banner.

In taking on management of the project, legendary photographic editor Roy Stryker recognized the reality of the marketing goal but sought out allies who would do justice to photography as a powerful storytelling medium. One kindred spirit on the conference Executive Committee was H.J. Heinz Co. CEO Jack Heinz, who also headed the foundation his father created. He personally admired photography as an art form and supported that role in the project as much as he recognized it as a promotional powerhouse. Indeed, The Howard Heinz Endowment was among several local foundations that endorsed the goals of civic education, artistic development and marketing, and provided funding.

Now, 60 years later, the Photographic Library project has served as the inspiration for a successor initiative, the Downtown Now Photography Project. This latest effort, funded by The Heinz Endowments, has embraced much of the mission of the 1950s project: to document dramatic changes across Pittsburgh’s physical landscape and to do so with an artistic sensibility.

What distinguishes this project from the original is that photographers are focusing only on downtown. Also, philanthropic goals have supplanted the civic and business boosterism that the Photographic Library was supposed to assist.

Working with Linda Benedict-Jones, the Carnegie Museum of Art’s first curator of photography, and consultant Mary Navarro, a former Endowments senior program officer, are nine of Pittsburgh’s most talented photographers. They have been sent into the city’s core to document the significant changes in the

natural and built environment brought on by an unprecedented development boom. In the past five years, more than \$2 billion has been committed to public and private projects on a downtown footprint so compact it takes the average person only 15 minutes to walk.

The Endowments’ goals are to do the work of preserving the historical record and also to provide more intensive photojournalistic reporting of this chapter of the city’s history. An added bonus for the community is that, in the hands of accomplished photographers, the visual record of change also rises to the level of high art, as selected images from the first two years of work attest on the following pages. At the end of this year, nearly 3,000 images will have been submitted, and 420 of those will have been selected for permanent archiving and use in a range of projects.

In a digitalized Pittsburgh of the 21st century, the range of possibilities for use in support of all the project goals is far beyond what the Photographic Library photographers ever could have imagined.

In the book “Witness to the Fifties: The Pittsburgh Photographic Library, 1950–1953,” editors Constance Schulz and Steven Plattner describe the collection of photographs as “at one level a reflection of the reality of what Pittsburgh had been and what it was becoming, and at another level, a reflection of multiple perceptions of what Pittsburgh’s past meant, and what its future ought to be.” If this project reaches those same two levels, it will be judged a stunning success. *h*





DYLAN VITONE

Progress in motion: It's skateboarding heaven in this October 2007 image, but this riverfront section that frames the David L. Lawrence Convention Center's water feature will be undergoing dramatic change as part of the \$8.5 million Three Rivers Park project. The steep grade that boarders love will give way to a flat staging area for boat docks, outdoor public programs, native plants and even public art. The redesign is part of the effort to complete an 11-mile loop of a rivers-edge trail system.



MARK PERROTT

New overshadows old: The venerable Benedum-Trees Building, one of the architectural gems of Pittsburgh at the dawn of the 20th century, now struggles for attention against the backdrop of a nearly completed Three PNC Plaza building. The largest LEED®-certified project in the country, the plaza is the latest expansion of PNC Financial Services Group's downtown presence. The 26-story structure, which opened last fall, has executive offices, a 165-room hotel operated by the Fairmont chain, luxury condominiums and a street-front park. This image was taken from Mt. Washington in late-afternoon light in March 2009.

MARTHA RIAL

Big changes under a big snow: Point Park University freshman Jossue Delgado and friends make a prime section of Point State Park their canvas for snow angel art in February after the heaviest snowfall in Pittsburgh in decades. The park, a signature landmark, has been the focus of a \$30 million renovation that includes a new lawn area on the city side. Another phase has centered on planting 7,000 native shrubs and trees in the woodlands area. This year's phase will renovate the riverfront promenades, upgrade the marine tie-up area, and install features that interpret the history, indigenous cultures and natural resources of the park.



RENEE ROSENSTEEL

Riverside gamble: The region's controversial stake in economic development, the \$780 million Rivers Casino, breaks ground on the North Shore waterfront in this January 2008 image taken from the West End Bridge. Before its opening last August, the project had to survive a brush with bankruptcy, a change of ownership, and numerous tangles with labor and public interest groups. Included on that list was Pittsburgh Riverlife, which worked to ensure that the latest addition to the riverfront landscape followed design and land-use standards.

KENNETH NEELY

Generational view: An older couple who likely remember when downtown was the hub for a public transportation system dominated by street cars brave a cold winter day in 2007 to watch the beginning of construction of the North Shore Connector, one of two underground tunnels included in a \$553 million expansion of the city's light rail transit system. The project, which will significantly reduce the physical barrier of the Allegheny River between the North Side and Downtown, has met with public objections over ballooning costs and the need for a North Shore stop that serves a casino and sports venues.

ANNIE O'NEILL

Framing the future: Vehicles jockey for space in the cramped and dingy Federal Street underpass during a January 2009 rush hour. The underpass is part of a railroad support system that also presents an unsightly physical barrier between the North Side and the gateway bridges to Downtown. Renovations that include repairs, public art and special lighting are planned for this underpass, a pilot project of the Charm Bracelet Project, a collaboration of key North Side stakeholders attempting to devise solutions to community fracturing.



