

The Dynamics of Neighborhood Change in Brewerytown, Philadelphia

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ABSTRACT

Although it was once a vibrant industrial area, by the end of the twentieth century, the Philadelphia neighborhood of Brewerytown stood ravaged and impoverished by decades of disinvestment and industrial abandonment. In the past few years, however, speculation and development have perked up as the city's economic center expands into the surrounding working-class neighborhoods. As Brewerytown's landscape changes, the neighborhood's residents, politicians and business leaders confront these changes in a variety of ways and justify their actions by telling different kinds of stories about what is happening in their neighborhood. To Westrum Development, Brewerytown is a bad and blighted area of the city, and their effort to build over 400 units of luxury housing in the area is an important step toward improving the neighborhood and making it more livable. Local residents, on the other hand, are split between those who feel that the new developments will offer much-needed economic opportunities and those who feel that many long-time members and institutions of the Brewerytown community are in danger of being gentrified out. Finally, it is the local government that must negotiate among all of these different groups to enable development while, hopefully, displacing as few people as possible. Through extensive interviews with some of the different stakeholders involved in this process, this paper offers a look at the ways in which these people interact with each other and analyzes the different factors that are shaping those interactions and ultimately determining the changing face of Philadelphia.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Brewerytown, once one of Philadelphia's major areas of industry and home to some of the nation's leading beer manufacturers has today become a hotspot in the fight over gentrification. Although the neighborhood boundaries are shifting as the social landscape evolves, Brewerytown is usually seen as stretching from the Schuylkill River on the west to 23rd St. on the east and from Parrish St. in the south to Cecil B. Moore Ave. in the north. As the "Fairmount" neighborhood immediately to the south becomes increasingly developed as a popular area for the city's young professionals, developers have begun to turn their eyes northward toward Brewerytown. Led by the Westrum Development Company and fully supported by the city's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, much of the area's old industrial area has today become the site of a massive new construction effort that will include more than 700 residential units when it is completed. At the center of this development is Westrum's Brewerytown Square, which features 144 market-rate townhouses, about half of which have already been built, that are being sold in the at prices above \$250,000. Although this development did not directly displace a single occupied house as it was built entirely on abandoned industrial land, it remains to be seen how it will affect the surrounding community of low-income African-Americans.

As tensions rise both in support and in opposition to this development, both sides work to construct narratives about the area that justify their point of view. Supporters of building housing for upper-income people in Brewerytown tend to present the area as a dilapidated slum and often exaggerate how long it has been this way for, claiming that the neighborhood has not been a vibrant part of the city's economy since Prohibition forced the original breweries to close in the 1920s. An article from *Philadelphia Weekly* sums this up concisely, claiming that "by the

mid-'20s, Brewerytown's formerly bustling streets were deserted. State-of-the art equipment that once churned out the nation's most popular lagers collected rust.”¹ While it is true that the neighborhood’s breweries never came back, the research that I present in Chapter Two of this paper indicates that the area did have a successful second life in the 1940s and fifties when many of the African-Americans who moved into the area were able to set up good lives for their families there. Although years of economic turmoil caused by the collapse of Philadelphia’s manufacturing industry shrank the size of this community dramatically, at the time that Westrum began to assemble the site in the late nineties, the neighborhood remained home to a vibrant African-American community of substantial size. As developments like Brewerytown Square begin to cause property values in this area to rise, the members of this disadvantaged community may well soon be faced with rents too high for them to continue living in the neighborhood.

THE CITY GOVERNMENT

Blight is not a particularly new problem for Philadelphia. Since the city first began losing many of its white residents in the late 1940s, the City of Philadelphia has taken a variety of actions to revitalize its abandoned neighborhoods. Today, there is some degree of consensus that, toward the beginning of this era, private interests were able to misdirect the city’s assets into profit-driven projects that did little to help the residents who were suffering most from deindustrialization. Instead of seeing industry as something good and essential that the city had to work to regain, the Philadelphia elite, by and large, accepted deindustrialization as being part of an unpleasant but healthy economic progression into a “post-industrial” urban economy. As such, urban historian David Bartelt argues that rather than directly addressing the “loss of the majority of blue-collar jobs in the city and region, and the subsequent thinning out and

¹ Shaffer, Gwen. “Strange Brew.” *Philadelphia Weekly*. Aug. 10, 2005.

abandonment of many of the neighborhoods that were linked to these jobs,”² the city chose “attracting large organizations to the downtown area”³ as its primary planning goal at this time. Bartelt’s point is not that this transformation to a service economy from a manufacturing economy was somehow avoidable or even that the municipal government was responsible for it in a profound way. Rather, he argues that instead of working to reincorporate the city’s dislocated working class in the transformation, the city framed its goals in a way that fundamentally ignored and thereby exacerbated the growing inequity and poverty:

According to this new urban ethic, the exclusion of much of the city’s population from both the residential revitalization and the limited job market of Center City is justified as both necessary and proper. Traditional ideologies of social justice and equal redistribution of benefits have been replaced with theories of “blaming the victim” and trickle down. Neighborhoods are either told to wait for the benefits of revitalization to spread throughout the entire city, or chided for being out of step, as it were, with the new realities of a postindustrial economy.⁴

Bartelt argues that, fundamentally, the city was defining success by economic growth, not by the increased social wellbeing of its population as a whole, and was allotting its funds accordingly.

This paper was going to briefly review the history of the City of Philadelphia’s attempts at urban renewal and offers an in depth discussion of the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI), the latest municipal effort at revitalizing Philadelphia, which provided substantial incentive and funding for Westrum to develop Brewerytown Square. With a proposed budget of \$1.6 billion over five years, the NTI is the most ambitious urban renewal project in the history of Philadelphia and is designed to reverse a 50-year pattern of population decline⁵ while avoiding many of the problems of neglect that Bartelt identifies in the earlier programs. There were going to be discussions of municipal programs, questions of whom these programs serve and what

² Bartelt, David. “Renewing Center City Philadelphia: Whose City? Which Public’s Interests?” in *Unequal Partnerships*. Ed. Gegory Squires. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. 1989.

³ Id. 81

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Vitiello, Domenic. “Twenty-First Century Urban Renewal in Philadelphia : The Neighborhood Transformation Initiative and its Critics” in *Progressive Planning* – Winter 2007.

vision they embody for Philadelphia and its residents will remain at the forefront as we look at the evolution of these programs and the ways that municipal government's goals for Philadelphia have evolved. But, alas, time was not permitting and this most important crux of the argument was sadly left unwritten.

THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

Although the city government has historically supported private developers, it is easy to see why many activists tend to vilify some of them as being greedy and tasteless destroyers of neighborhoods. Yet most developers do not see themselves this way, and, if we are to understand what is happening in Brewerytown, we must work to understand the forces that are motivating developers to build there as well as how the developers themselves understand the work that they are doing. Although it does not relate directly to Brewerytown, Steve Volk's *Philadelphia Weekly* article about Bart Blatstein, an immensely powerful Philadelphia-based developer, offers a look at just this perspective. Volk describes how Blatstein likes to think of himself as "an adventurer - a gambling, swashbuckling savior [who brings] light to people that haven't seen light in a generation."⁶ Unsurprisingly, Blatstein's messiah-complex is less than appealing to many; Volk writes that Blatstein "can be awfully off-putting, especially to the people who lived in these blech! communities long before he ever arrived there."⁷

On the one hand, developers like Blatstein, or John Westrum, the man behind Brewerytown Square, do have the ability to dramatically restructure working-class neighborhoods to serve their own monetary interests in ways that have little, if anything, to do with the interests and ideas of the surrounding community. But, on the other hand, developers cannot be entirely removed from the interests of others, as they must ultimately sell their product

⁶ Volk, Steve. "The Second Coming of Bart Blatstein." *Philadelphia Weekly*: Oct. 13th, 2004.

⁷ Ibid.

to home-buyers or tenants whose desires they must appeal to. In addition, the city government provides a variety of avenues through which a well-organized community can pressure a developer to meet its demands through zoning regulations and participatory planning procedures. Developers must therefore shape their rhetoric to appeal to both the consumer and the neighbor, processes that often lead in contradictory directions. Volk describes how Blatstein had to alter his pitch to appeal to the local residents by offering them respect: “to Blatstein's credit, he learned. He now talks mostly about the appreciation he's developed for the fabric of Northern Liberties, its collection of streets and people--independent types, pioneers, artists and especially its old-school, second-, third- and fourth-generation families.”⁸

Chapter Three of this paper examines both how developers conceptualize what they are doing when they build in inner-city neighborhoods to examine how they frame the projects when they sell them to the people whose support they need, both potential buyers and the surrounding community. Through an analysis of the narratives and myths held by the people involved in the privileged side of gentrification, including developers, real-estate agents and new residents to developing neighborhoods, I examine the views that such people hold about what is happening in Philadelphia and what their effect is upon these urban changes. Lastly, I discuss these development projects from a colder, logical perspective looking at the economic rationale behind why developers choose to build in the ways that they do. My goal in writing this section is to try to present the issue of gentrification from the developer's perspective as openly as possible. As I see it, reaching a deeper understanding of how the people responsible for today's gentrification understand what they are doing is key to developing more sustainable and empowering strategies of development.

⁸ *ibid.*

THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITY

Placed in a political and economic context defined by the different levels of government and the interests of private developers eager to develop low-income neighborhoods for personal gain, inner-city communities find themselves in a difficult situation. On the one hand, the lack of economic activity in their area and the resulting high levels of unemployment and poor state of social services is an undeniably large problem that must be addressed. On the other hand, however, many of the predominant strategies to address these problems, such as creating incentives for private developers to build large developments, may lead to the neighborhood's becoming prohibitively expensive to the communities that live there, which are often disproportionately elderly, working-class / poor people of color.

This paper attempts to paint a picture of how people in the area have responded to gentrification. First, by examining the history of the demographics of the area and comparing this to what we can find out about the new residents of the Brewerytown Square development, a sense of the social differences between the two populations emerges. Then, by looking at the history of a number of community-based organizations in the area that are involved in the development process, I show the variety of frames and methods that community members have used to take action in the changes happening around them. These organizations vary from the West Girard Business Association, a group largely in favor of converting old buildings to more profitable uses, to the African-American Businesses and Residents Association, which has been organizing to prevent many such projects. By examining the structure of these organizations and the ways in which they frame their arguments, the complexity of the social dynamics of gentrification become apparent. Hopefully, by looking at how governmental, business and

community-based actors each understand what they are doing to be good, this paper will help to resolve some of that complexity.

CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORY OF BREWERYTOWN

PART ONE: “ANCIENT” HISTORY

Brewerytown’s evolution from a rural area of farms to a heavily developed industrial zone surrounded by dense blocks of row houses can be seen clearly on a series of maps from the late 1800s that were originally drawn for insurance purposes. The first map, Samuel Smedley’s 1863 *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*,⁹ shows an area that while still largely undeveloped, already has a clearly laid out street grid and several small breweries along the section of Thompson St. that would become the industrial center of brewerytown. While no explicitly residential structures are marked in this area of the map, there is a hotel, and it may well be the case that these early breweries were family-run enterprises run out of the homes of the people who operated them.

In the 12 years between the Smedley map and the next map, G.M. Hopkins’ 1875 *City Atlas of Philadelphia by Wards*,¹⁰ Brewerytown made serious strides toward industrialization. A rail-road was built cutting north-eastward from the Schuylkill River across northern Philadelphia, connecting the industry in this area to key points along the east coast. The easy transport brought by the railroad combined perfectly with the site’s proximity to the Schuylkill river, which provided the breweries with ice, to spark rapid industrial development. The 1875 map offers clear evidence of this exponential burst in industry: in just 12 years, the area went from having only a few, small scattered buildings to holding a three-block-long stretch of factories with spaced out industrial buildings extending two blocks to the north and one block south. This growth included both the starting of at least eight new small breweries and the expansion of several breweries into large brick structures.

⁹ Smedley, Samuel. *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co. 1863.

¹⁰ *City Atlas of Philadelphia by Wards*. Philadelphia: G.M. Hopkins, C. E. 1875

Residential development in the area, however, lagged somewhat with little more than speculation by 1875. While the 1863 map showed few names of land-owners, the 1875 map shows a clearly speculated landscape divided into clear land-owners with some areas already subdivided for row house construction yet few buildings actually standing. Although most of the subdivided land south of brewerytown already shows buildings on the 1875 map, the land around the industrial center of brewerytown and north of it had only scattered construction at this time. Predictably, this could not last. By the next map, done in 1886,¹¹ a massive number of brick row houses had been built. Undeveloped blocks had become anomalies. The industrial area expanded as well with two companies: J & P Baltz Brewing Co. and the Bergner and Engel Brewing Co. consolidating entire blocks into their control.

With the vast majority of the land in the area developed by the late 1880s, physical changes to the landscape over the next thirty years were much less dramatic. Industrially, the land diversified in function becoming increasingly vertically integrated. While the 1886 map shows mostly breweries with a few directly related businesses like an ice house and a bottling plant, the later maps show the construction of two grain processing plants that probably served to process the barley and hops needed to make the beer as well as a cooperage that may have made kegs. The last map from this period, made in 1901,¹² offers one of the best images that we have of the area at its industrial peak. It shows the area evolving with the technology of the time, now hosting large facilities for the Yellow Cab Co. and the Philadelphia Electric Manufacturing Co. in addition to one of the largest centers of beer manufacturing in the country. These blocks now housed one of Philadelphia's leading industrial districts and produced so much that train lines

¹¹ *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: G.W. Bromley & Co. 1886.

¹² *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: G.W. Bromley & Co. 1901.

were built leading literally into the middle of some of the largest factories to facilitate loading and transport.

Yet, as with most of Philadelphia's industry, the good times and profit could not last. On January 16th, 1919, the eighteenth amendment was ratified, giving Americans one year to stop all "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors."¹³ The breweries tried desperately to stay in business, and brewerytown historian, Rich Wagner, claims that some went so far as to make their product in secret underground catacombs, distributing it through organized crime channels,¹⁴ but, ultimately, this model proved unsustainable. Within a few years, "Brewerytown's formerly bustling streets were deserted. State-of-the art equipment that once churned out the nation's most popular lagers collected rust"¹⁵. When the 21st amendment was ratified on December 5th, 1933 overturning prohibition, it proved too late for brewerytown. Faced with rusted equipment, a scarcity of capital caused by the Depression and immense competition from the new "mega-breweries" that had been built in the western United States, there was not a single brewery that was able to reopen successfully.¹⁶

PART TWO: *DAYS OF HOPE*

While the maps that were just discussed depict the construction of the built environment of Brewerytown, by 1920, much of that landscape had been completed. As such, the maps that are available for the second half of the twentieth century differ relatively little from each other and show few of the important social changes that happened in the surrounding residential neighborhood. Fortunately, however, as the boundaries around Brewerytown's census tracts

¹³ The United States Constitution: Amendment 18. January 16, 1919

¹⁴ Shaffer, Gwen. "Strange Brew" in *Philadelphia Weekly*. August 10, 2007.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interview in Person with Rich Wagner, Brewerytown Historian. October, 2007.

have remained constant, despite the tracts having been renumbered several times, statistics are available for the area at ten year intervals starting in 1940. Unlike the maps, these figures do show much of the relevant history of the last sixty years of Brewerytown. As I will show in the next few pages, these numbers do not support the conclusion that the area fell apart after prohibition that some have drawn. Rather, they show that while the neighborhood's industrial area may never have regained its economic significance, the surrounding row houses did become home to a series of thriving working-class communities, serving throughout the 1940s and fifties as an attractive destination for many African-American families [see Figure 1: Chart of Brewerytown Population Change by Race].

Although Brewerytown contained sizeable populations of both white and black people in 1940, over the following sixty years, the two populations exhibit distinctly different trends. The white population exhibits a somewhat predictable pattern of white flight from the city, decreasing in every year of the survey. In 1940, the first year for which census data is available for the neighborhood, white people comprised the solid majority (69.3%) of Brewerytown. Between 1940 and 1950, the white population decreased by about 12%, a noticeable trend that was probably concentrated toward the end of the decade with the rise of the Postwar suburbs in the city's periphery. Over the next twenty years, this trend becomes increasingly drastic: between 1950 and 1960, the white population fell by 69%; between 1960 and 1970, it fell by an even more severe 70%. In the 1970s, the rate of decrease began to slow down, with a net loss of around 45% of the white population, and by 1980 there were only 1,039 white people reported living in Brewerytown, less than a twentieth of the almost 23,000 white people who had lived there in 1940. Although the white population loss tapered off almost completely in the 1980s, the 1990s saw a resurgence in white flight with a loss of very close to half of the number of

white people who were left in the neighborhood, the most intense white population loss since the 1960s. By 2000, there were only 513 white people listed as living in Brewerytown, accounting for just 3.3% of the neighborhood.

The history of African-Americans in the neighborhood is quite different. Indeed, the neighborhood's black population grew most rapidly, more than tripling, from 10,176 black residents in 1940 to 34,872 in 1960, during a time period in which Brewerytown's white population was decreasing dramatically. Yet the exact relationship between these two trends cannot be derived from the census figures alone. Probably the influx of black people to Brewerytown and the exodus of white people from the neighborhood were mutually reinforcing trends, but they could also have occurred largely independently of each other, or one could have been the direct result of the other. To begin with, while they happened over the same basic time frame, the two trends were not truly simultaneous: the decade with the most black folks moving into the neighborhood was the forties whereas "white flight" did not really take off until the fifties. As such, it seems likely that while white people leaving Brewerytown freed up the housing stock and made it easier for black people to move in, it did not act as the underlying cause of the black migration. What is much more likely is that the black influx was part of what sociologist and historian William Julius Wilson describes as "the steady stream of black migrants from the rural South [that] was absorbed into the urban labor market throughout the 1940s and early 1950s."¹⁷ Unfortunately, even though the census keeps track of residents who were born in other countries, it does not keep track of residents born in other states, so it does not show how many of the black folks who moved into Brewerytown at this time were part of this national migration northward and how many were from other places.

¹⁷ Wilson, William Julius. *The Declining Significance of Race*. Chicago; The University of Chicago Press. 1978. P89

While white people leaving Brewerytown probably did not fundamentally cause black people to move in, the inverse might be true that the large number of incoming black folks catalyzed the rate at which the white people left. However, there appears to be little consensus in the academic work that has explored this. One of the major studies that indicates little correlation is David Bradford and Harry Kelejian's 1973 regression analysis of the factors that influence the spatial distribution of the middle-class in relation to the city. Although they found a correlation between middle-class people's decision to live in the suburbs and the class structure of the city, once this was accounted for, they found little correlation between "white flight" and the city's racial make-up. They concluded, "once the *income distribution* of the central city was accounted for ..., the race variable proved not to be significant"¹⁸. Sociologist Harvey Marshall reached similar conclusions in 1979, concluding:

*"Central city whites are apparently not concerned about the relative size of the black population per se; or, if they are, this concern is not reflected in decisions to move to the suburbs. Instead, it is only because large black populations are associated with high crime rates and frequent riots that whites leave central cities, and even this indirect effect is not large"*¹⁹.

While there is no way to know what motivated white people to leave Brewerytown when they did, it certainly seems reasonable that the opportunities for safety, privacy and wealth offered by the new suburban developments in Philadelphia's periphery would have been far more influential than the arrival of new neighbors.

At the same time, there are several scholars who have analyzed data sets similar to those analyzed in the studies just discussed but have arrived at the conclusion that race was, in fact, an important factor in the white middle-class's decision to leave cities. Two years after Bradford

¹⁸ Bradford, David F. and Harry H. Kelejian. "An Econometric Model of the Flight to the Suburbs" in *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 81, No. 3. (May - Jun., 1973)P585

¹⁹ Marshall, Harvey. "White Movement to the Suburbs: A Comparison of Explanations" in *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 44, No. 6. (Dec., 1979), P990.

and Kelejian published their study, Joseph Parvin reassessed their data and contrary to the initial finding, determined that there was a correlation between the racial make-up of a city and the geographic distribution of the white middle-class. The explanation that he speculated to explain his finding was that “As the central cities' populations become increasingly nonwhite, with Negro neighborhoods spreading outward from the cities' centers, the scarcity of intracity segregation possibilities will accentuate the flight of the white middle class.”²⁰ In other words, as more and more African-Americans moved into Philadelphia neighborhoods like Brewerytown, it became increasingly difficult for white residents looking for homes surrounded by other white people to find such places in the city. William Frey reached similar conclusions, writing that, even though several race-related factors like recent desegregation of public schools or racial disturbances in the late 1960s had few effects on mobility, “Our findings do not allow us to discount the racial composition of the central city as a predisposing factor toward white suburbanward movement”²¹. While Brewerytown’s large black population was probably not the number one reason that white people there chose to leave, Frey’s point that it should not be discounted as a relevant factor seems fair.

Despite the differences in the conclusions that these studies reached about the reasons that motivated middle-class white people to choose to leave inner-city neighborhoods like Brewerytown, every one of the studies presents this process as one of choice. White people could have remained in neighborhoods like Brewerytown had they wanted to, and some did, but most chose to take the option of selling their houses and moving somewhere else.

²⁰ Parvin, Joseph. “The Effect of Race on the Flight to the Suburbs” in *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 83, No. 4. (Aug., 1975), p. 865.

²¹ Frey, William H. “Central City White Flight: Racial and Nonracial Causes” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 44, No. 3. (Jun., 1979), pp. 425-448.

Although Brewerytown became increasingly unattractive to white people between 1940 and 1970, to the black people who came to the neighborhood during this time, Brewerytown offered real opportunities for economic advancement. Back in 1940, the 30% of Brewerytown's population that consisted of black people tended to be in a much worse economic situation than their white neighbors. Although both groups tended to rent their homes, whites (who exhibited home-ownership rates of 30.7%) were four times more likely to own their homes than blacks (whose home-ownership rates were a mere 6.9%).²² Over the following couple of decades as the neighborhood's white residents began to move out to the suburbs and put their houses up for sale, this trend changed dramatically. Although the Census stopped tracking home-ownership rates by race after 1940, the figures clearly show that Brewerytown increasingly became a place where African-Americans were able to buy property and make new lives for their families. Had ownership rates remained even roughly the same as they had been in 1940, a dramatic reduction in the population exhibiting the much higher ownership rate (white people) and a simultaneous increase in the population with the lower rate (black people) would have led to a massive drop in the overall ownership rates. Doing a quick calculation, it is possible to say that if ownership rates had remained at their 1940 levels for both races, the population changes would have caused the total ownership rate to lower from 23.7% in 1940 to around 16% in 1950 and down to around 10% by 1960. Instead, the opposite happened, and the total home-ownership rate increased dramatically in this time: coming in at 39.5% in 1950 and even higher at 42.2% in 1960. Whatever else can be said about Brewerytown in this time period, it is undeniable that the neighborhood increasingly became a place where African-Americans exercised one of the most fundamental right of liberal-democracy, the right to own land.

²² United States Bureau of the Census *1940 National Census*

While it could be possible that the neighborhood worsened in other ways over this period of time when white people were leaving and black home-ownership rates were rising, the census figures indicate that it may, in fact, have gotten better. Unemployment rates dropped dramatically, from 21.9% in 1940 to 8.5% in 1950 to 7.2% in 1960 [see Figure Two]. However, although census figures and sociological studies offer powerful tools for looking at what happened in places like Brewerytown at this time, if we really want to reach a more textured and qualitative sense of what these historical changes meant for places like Brewerytown, we need to hear the stories of people who experienced this history firsthand. Although I failed to do this, choosing instead to focus my interviewing efforts around talking to some of the stakeholders currently shaping the neighborhood, I did find such an oral history with a Chicago resident from a neighborhood similar to Brewerytown. The resident, Tim Black, a retired teacher, describes the good feelings among many of Chicago's African-Americans in the 1950s, saying:

*“Those of us who returned from World War Two with the hopes and dreams of a future for our children and our grandchildren came to believe that we’d see the results of the struggle. We have broken the barriers. We have integrated the armed forces. Education is now going to be available for everybody. Job opportunities are going to be available. This was our belief”*²³.

It's easy to see how the 1950s and 1960s could have been a good era for black people in Brewerytown. Although some black residents did leave the neighborhood in the sixties, when the black population shrank by about 6%, this may be indicative of their being successful as moving is a difficult process that usually requires a certain amount of savings. As such, arguments that Brewerytown has been blighted for more than half a century seem off base. As I have shown here, as late as 1970, Brewerytown was home to a successful and hard-working community of African-Americans.

²³ Terkel, Studs. “Lift Every Voice: Tim Black” in *Hope Dies Last*. New York: The New Press 2003. P139.

PART THREE: *THE FALL OF THE DREAM*

Whereas Brewerytown had offered African-Americans affordable homes, reasonable jobs in nearby industries and hope for better lives for their families through the 1960s, by the beginning of the seventies that had begun to change for the worse. For the most part, the changes that occurred in the neighborhood over the next thirty years resemble those that happened in a multitude of urban neighborhoods around the country that once centered around industry and have since been left in a similarly blighted social, economic, cultural and physical situation. Paul Grogan and Tony Proscio write that “from 1967 to 1987, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit each lost *more than half* their manufacturing jobs.”²⁴ Whereas Brewerytown had been able to recover from the loss of the brewing industry in the twenties, the combination of the city’s shrinking population and the cheaper cost of labor elsewhere in the country rendered the city unable to muster much of a response. As the jobs and population left urban neighborhoods around the country, the many social services and institutions, including municipal governments, that depended on urban residents for income were stretched thin. Grogan and Proscio argue that “the combination of high unemployment, and ever-weakening family structure, and a dearth of mainstream institutions meant that inner-city communities were ill equipped to combat the triple plague of crack cocaine, AIDS, and homelessness that exploded during the eighties.”²⁵

The census data for Brewerytown indicates that Brewerytown’s once vibrant African-American community felt these changes hard, and between 1970 and 1980, the unemployment rate, which had been steadily dropping over the prior thirty years, jumped from 4.1% to 20.9%.

²⁴ Grogan, Paul S. and Proscio, Tony, *Comeback Cities: A Blueprint for Urban Neighborhood Revival*. Colorado: Westview Press, 2000. P38.

²⁵ Id. 43

Although the neighborhood's black population had begun to shrink as early as the 1960s as noted above, it had done so at a much lower rate of decrease than that of the white population, which shrunk more than ten times faster, decreasing by more than 70% during that decade. Faced with a sudden loss in jobs, however, the black population began to decrease much faster and continued to do so throughout the next thirty years. As they did, Brewerytown emptied out and vacancy rates rose dramatically, from 6% of the residential units in 1970 to 17% in 1980 and reached around 28% in 2000.

Essentially, over this period of time, Brewerytown residents of all races who had the ability to leave did so, leaving behind those least able to deal with the collapsing urban economy. In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson argues that while majority black inner-city neighborhoods like Brewerytown certainly had social problems in the 1960s and earlier, “joblessness, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency, and serious crime were significantly lower than in later years and did not reach catastrophic proportions until the mid 1970s.”²⁶ He attributes the rise of these problems primarily to this departure of the black middle-class from these neighborhoods that followed the loss of industrial jobs in the 1970s. He writes that without a strong class of black community leaders, neighborhoods like Brewerytown lost the “sense of community, positive neighborhood identification and explicit norms and sanctions against aberrant behavior”²⁷ that had kept these problems from growing out of control.

Today, Brewerytown is plagued by a plethora undeniable problems that many people in the city agree need to be addressed. With descriptions of these problems available everyday

²⁶ Wilson, William Julius. *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1987

²⁷ Ibid.

across the city's media, from the newspapers to the TV news, it is not surprising that many people in the city have come to regard such neighborhoods as "bad" places with little regard or respect for the people who live there. One example of an article that probably fueled such notions is a *Philadelphia Weekly* article from 2003 about a young boy from West Philadelphia who had the courage to turn his violent, crack-dealing father into the police. The article describes how:

*"Father and son would head off to 27th and Stiles in Brewerytown, where all promises were broken. If the kid cried about getting mixed up in **the life**--what cop's going to search a little kid, after all?--his father would threaten to throw him into the Schuylkill or beat him with a belt wrapped around his fist."*²⁸

Stories like this about Brewerytown, true as they may be, inevitably influence the way that people think about the neighborhood and the kind of life that people live there. Such images affect not only average citizens, but policy makers as well. As I explore in the next three chapters, the sense that many people in the city have that Brewerytown is a bad place that needs serious change has an impact on the way that developers present the projects that they do there as well as on the kinds of plans that the city develops for the neighborhood. Yet, despite its problems, Brewerytown remains home to a large community of low-income African-Americans. Whereas once Brewerytown offered this community hopes for a better life, the last thirty years have seen many of those hopes ripped away by the loss of many of the city's job opportunities. Now as the neighborhood is finally on the verge of revitalization, this community must struggle if it is to see its hopes for a new life in Brewerytown fulfilled at last.

²⁸ Hickey, Brian. "Person of the Year: Eddie Sheed Jr. : He Refused to Sell Crack for his Father" in *Philadelphia Weekly*. January 1, 2003.

CHAPTER 3: THE DEVELOPER

PART ONE: *BREWERYTOWN SQUARE*

In 1997, the history of Brewerytown took a dramatic turn when the Westrum Development Company, a large private real-estate development company based in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, began to acquire properties in the neighborhood's old industrial area.²⁹ Since then, the site has grown to include a number of other developers and now spans five blocks and 17 urban acres. At a projected cost of more than \$100 million, the project has received the ecstatic support of many key figures including Philadelphia Mayor John Street, who described it "Phenomenal," saying, "I've been asking for this for 20 years... Westrum did this with their money. They didn't ask for money. Every house around here appreciated."³⁰ Indeed, the city's unwavering support for the project has been essential to the project's success from the start. This support has mainly come through the city's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI), which has dedicated more than \$1.2 million toward assembling the site for the developers by acquiring properties through eminent domain and financing the demolition of a number of run-down structures. When the project comes to completion, it will include more than 700 units of housing, around 80 of which will be "affordable,"³¹ in addition to office and commercial space, which John Westrum, the president of Westrum Development, has said will include a supermarket.³²

²⁹ "Best Real Estate Deal Winner: Brewerytown Square" in *Philadelphia Business Journal*. Oct. 24, 2006.

³⁰ McGovern, Stephen J. "Philadelphia's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative: A Case Study of Mayoral Leadership, Bold Planning, and Conflict" *Housing Policy Debate Vol. 17 Iss. 3*. Fannie Mae Foundation. 2006

³¹ "Brewerytown." Website of the Philadelphia Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD). www.phila.gov/ohcd/brewerytown.htm

³² Personal Interview with President of West Girard Community Council Bob Seabury

At the center of the development lies Westrum’s main event, 144 high-end townhouses, each with its own one-car garage, known as Brewerytown Square. Westrum is building these houses without public subsidy³³ to be sold at market-rate prices currently ranging from \$259,990 for the smaller, two-bedroom, 1200 sq. ft. “Amber” model to \$362,990 for the larger, three-bedroom, 1700 sq. ft. “Lager” model.³⁴ Fueled by a massive advertising campaign that includes ads everywhere from newspapers and magazines to the sides of city busses,³⁵ these houses have been selling rapidly. The Philadelphia Business Journal reports that when “sales finally opened, the community’s first 12 homes, priced in the mid-\$200,000s, sold in a day. Deposits quickly followed for homes that had yet to be built.”³⁶ While these prices are almost ten times what nearby houses are worth (the U.S. Census indicates that in 2000, the average house in the Brewerytown zip code 19121 was worth \$21,900),³⁷ they are still substantially cheaper than comparable high-end condominiums in Center City, where “it’s not easy to buy a condominium for anything less than \$400,000, or \$500,000 or \$600,000, and that goes right up to \$1 million.”³⁸ In addition, the site’s proximity to key roads like I-76 and Kelley Drive as well to the Schuylkill River and Fairmount Park, which runs along the river and includes such sites as Boathouse Row and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, make it attractive to many young home-buyers looking to remain closely connected to the city.

These reasons why the site is attractive today are actually somewhat similar to the reasons that it was attractive over a hundred years ago to the industrialists who built the factory

³³ Id. Philadelphia OHCD website

³⁴ “Pricing & Availability” flier picked up in September, 2007 from Westrum’s Brewerytown Square sales office.

³⁵ “Brewerytown Square” ad seen on bus on Philadelphia’s I-76 in November, 2007.

³⁶ Id. Philadelphia Business Journal article

³⁷ United States Bureau of the Census *National Census 2000*

³⁸ Id. Philadelphia Business Journal

buildings that are currently being torn down to enable the new construction. While the city's highway system has replaced much of the significance of the freight train, which now serves as a nuisance cutting through the back edge of Brewerytown Square, the site is still located within easy access of the city's transportation matrix. In addition, the site's proximity to the river continues to serve as a key asset, albeit for different reasons. In the industrial era, the river served a primarily economic function for the area, facilitating transportation and making it possible for the breweries to acquire ice. Today, as developers look for attractive sites on which to build housing, the river remains a lure, no longer as an economic asset, but rather as a place for recreation with a primarily social and aesthetic value. Ultimately, it is therefore not that surprising, when looked at geographically, that at a time when developers are looking for attractive sites in Philadelphia, Brewerytown would be near the top of their lists.

In addition to these more everyday reasons that individual people might choose to move into Brewerytown Square, there has been a substantial amount of academic work exploring the wider societal reasons that people across the globe are moving into developments like Brewerytown Square. Chris Hamnett, a geographer at King's College in London, offers a look at this social context that enables gentrification in his article "The Blind Men and the Elephant: The Explanation of Gentrification." He begins by analyzing an argument, which he accredits to David Ley, a geographer at the University of British Columbia, that at the root of gentrification lies the dramatic social reorganization that has resulted from the economic transformation of cities like Philadelphia. Whereas neighborhoods like Brewerytown once offered homes to the city's industrial working-class, the "declining role of unskilled labour in the production process" and accompanying "white collar job growth in the central business district" have given rise to a

new “geography of the post-industrial society.”³⁹ Essentially, the expansion of the class of “professionals, managers and other quaternary employees working downtown”⁴⁰ has led to the emergence of a large number of young urban professionals looking for homes in Philadelphia.

In addition to the expansion of the city’s class of white-collar workers, Hamnett argues that the residential preferences of this class have changed as well. Whereas fifty years ago, white-collar workers in their early twenties might well have been inclined to have children and live in the suburbs, Hamnett argues that today there are “specific cultural and consumption requirements of a fragment of the new class ... that are met by an inner-city location.”⁴¹ In many ways, Brewerytown Square is designed to cater toward this increasing demographic of young, child-less, middle-class people. The sales associate whom I spoke with clearly saw the development this way, describing it as “a good starting place for young professionals buying their first home”⁴² complete with a wet bar for entertaining guests. She was clear to state, however, that although there were a few families already living in the development, the multiple flights of stairs required to enter some of the units would not be ideal for young children and she expected most residents to sell their properties within ten years of purchase. However, while Brewerytown Square may serve this new class of young middle-class people well, to many of them, purchasing a property in a place like Brewerytown Square is as much an economic investment as it is a lifestyle choice.

Likewise, Hamnett moves on from discussing the social motivations underlying the gentrification of neighborhoods like Brewerytown to discussing the economic incentives of such

³⁹ Hamnett, Chris “The Blind Men and the Elephant: The Explanation of Gentrification.” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 16, No. 2.1991. p177

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Id. 184

⁴² Interview with Westrum sales associate. November 2007

developments. Drawing largely on the “rent gap” theory, which he accredits to Neil Smith, Hamnett explains that urban neighborhoods are redeveloped not only because there are people with money who want to live there but because there is a large amount of money to be made in catering to their demand. As will be explained in chapter five, throughout much of the last half-century, both the banks and the city’s municipal government abandoned inner-city neighborhoods like Brewerytown, denying capital for development through red-lining and other processes that only perpetuated the cycle of dilapidation. Eventually a point was reached where the price of land in places like Brewerytown was so low that “the capitalized ground rent of site or neighborhood [was] less than its potential ground rent in its highest and best use.”⁴³ In other words, by the end of the twentieth century, the buildings in many inner-city neighborhoods like Brewerytown had become so rundown that completely rebuilding them generated enough more capital than they did in their form that the increase in value covered the cost of construction and even brought in a large profit.

Hamnett points out that these large profit margins and relatively small requisite initial investments are true not only of large-scale constructions like Brewerytown Square but also of every house in the neighborhood. Although building on formerly industrial land requires large corporate developers like Westrum with the capital and connections to municipal power necessary to assemble a large enough site, small-time developers can easily make money in places like Brewerytown by buying individual properties, redeveloping them, sometimes while living in them, and then selling them. Quoting Neil Smith, Hamnett writes that situations like that of Brewerytown turn “the occupier developer, who is generally an inefficient operator in the

⁴³Id. Hamnett P179

construction industry, into an appropriate vehicle for recycling devalued neighborhoods.”⁴⁴ As such, it is reasonable to expect that as large-scale developers like Westrum begin to put Brewerytown on the map as an attractive place for young middle-class people, other people will buy properties in the surrounding neighborhood and develop them as well. If things continue at the rate that they are, within a short time, all of Brewerytown could well become home to a transient middle-class population of young urban professionals. However, in the words of urban geographer Tom Slater, if we really want to understand what gentrification means to the neighborhoods in which it happens, “We need to focus on the effects – not the causes of gentrification.”⁴⁵

PART TWO: THE EFFECTS OF BREWERYTOWN SQUARE

For the most part, the area being developed into Brewerytown Square lies in the formerly industrial zone of Brewerytown, which originally served as the home of the brewing industry described in the last chapter. As this industry had entirely abandoned the area and none of the buildings had been converted to housing, the development did not directly displace any businesses or private houses. However, in helping Westrum to assemble the site, the city did use eminent domain to threaten a number of community spaces that had sprung up in the abandoned buildings. While the African-American Business and Residents Association was ultimately successful in their year-long campaign to defend the Songhai community-center from being taken,⁴⁶ the city did succeed in forcefully acquiring a community-run horse stable. In an article in *The Wall Street Journal*, Sarah Nassauer gives a picture of how important this stable was to the surrounding community, writing that “There were at least 150 horses being kept at that site,

⁴⁴ Id. 180

⁴⁵ Slater 743

⁴⁶ Lin, Jennifer. “Eminent Domain Turned on Its Ear in Brewerytown.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Aug. 11, 2006.

which acted as a central meeting place for riders all over the city.”⁴⁷ Although horseback riding is often thought of as an upper-class and white activity, journalist Mike Newall explains that stories about Philadelphia’s “black inner-city cowboys” date back to “early last century, when black stable hands who worked for wealthy equestrians would bring their mounts here for a little weekend racing. A ritual was born, and the tradition has endured.”⁴⁸ Newall goes on to explain that retired race horses are available cheaply at auctions in rural Pennsylvania and that many of the cowboys “buy aging racehorses--many of which would otherwise be killed--and give them a second racing life.”⁴⁹

In addition to offering a fun source of recreation, these stables also carried great social and cultural significance for the community of Brewerytown. In George McCollough’s 2005 documentary film about the use of eminent domain in Philadelphia, *All For the Taking*, he interviews community activist Al Alston about the importance of these stables. Alston says:

*“Those stables were an important part of our community. They helped to give us an identity. We liked seeing kids riding horses across the Girard Avenue Bridge. We knew those kids were learning a lesson that most kids in town don’t get to learn: how to care for another living being.”*⁵⁰

The article by Newall describes their significance in a similar light, quoting Ellis Ferrell, an old cowboy who ran riding programs in the area, who states that “learning to ride kept the kids out of the drugs and taught them responsibility and respect. But all that's gone now.”⁵¹ Over the decades when Brewerytown was becoming prey to blight and rising crime rates, stables such as

⁴⁷ Nassauer, Sarah “In the Inner City of Philadelphia, Horsey Set Bridles” *Wall Street Journal*. Sept. 25, 2007

⁴⁸ Newall, Mike “Blazing Saddles: A Long Proud Fairmount Park Tradition May Soon Come to an End” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Aug. 11, 2004.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “All For the Taking: 21st Century Urban Renewal” documentary film produced by George McCollough. Berkeley Media LLC. 2005.

⁵¹ Id. Newall

these offered an essential resource to a community struggling to hold on. Nassauer writes that “these urban stables thrived in the second half of the 20th century as the city abandoned industrial buildings that then made ideal rent-free or inexpensive stable locations.”⁵² Now as developers like Westrum take up an interest in developing housing for upper-income people in places like Brewerytown, many claim that the city is coming to their aid by using its power of eminent domain to get rid of pesky African-American community spaces like the stables.

To be fair, there a number of respectable organizations that have supported the seizure including Philadelphia Animal Control who compiled a report on the stables at the time of their closing that deemed them “unsanitary and unsafe.”⁵³ The cowboys deny these claims, however, and Newall reports that Ferrell argued that “The animals were kept in fine condition. They were just looking to get us out.”⁵⁴ In the end, the most powerful opposition to the stables came from the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority (RDA), the city agency that oversaw the seizure. At the core of the RDA’s argument was the claim that “the cowboys were illegally using the former warehouse as a stable, a use it wasn't zoned for.”⁵⁵ Situations such as this highlight the inherent inequity of enabling the city’s political elite to use zoning regulations to dictate a story about what “should” be in a neighborhood in a way that fundamentally ignores the voices of the local residents who actually occupy the spaces in question. In *All For the Taking*, McCullough captures this sense of being silenced that many local community members felt in an interview with one of the displaced cowboys who says:

“They said that land wasn’t ours. They said they owned it. You can’t have anything down here. We’re taking it over... They didn’t come to us as owners to involve us in our own community. They didn’t care. They wanted us out. Period. This mare was my life

⁵² Id. Nassauer

⁵³ Id. Newall

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

dream. It's worth millions of dollars to me.”⁵⁶

This story brings to light one of the most fundamental questions at the core of this thesis: what obligations do the city government, real-estate developers and the new residents who are shaping the future of urban neighborhoods like Brewerytown have to the communities who have occupied these neighborhoods for decades?

While there is no simple answer to that question, it seems clear that even if Westrum ultimately acts in ways that work against the interests of the Brewerytown community, they should at least acknowledge that those interests exist and negotiate accordingly. Yet, much of the writing by and about Westrum Development and the new residents of Brewerytown Square indicates a fundamental disregard for the interests and sometimes even the existence of a surrounding community. A flier that Westrum distributes in the sales office titled “Why You Should Purchase a New Home at Brewerytown Square” describes the development as being “bordered by Fairmount Park...on the west and... the burgeoning Fairmount neighborhood to the south.”⁵⁷ No mention is made of anything lying to the east or to the north of the site, the places where nearby disadvantaged communities of color live. While proximity to urban poverty and abandoned buildings is clearly not a selling point for the project, the omission clearly says something about the kind of story that Westrum would like to construct about Brewerytown Square and which actors they would rather not cast as part of the story.

While Westrum Development’s impact on the neighborhood is far from all bad, the way in which they frame the development as the heroic savior of an abandoned and dilapidated landscape is profoundly problematic as it alienates the people who already live there. One

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ “Why You Should Purchase a New Home at Brewerytown Square” flier picked up in September, 2007 from Westrum’s Brewerytown Square sales office.

source of reification of this savior myth came in 2006, when *Philadelphia Business Journal* awarded Westrum a prize for the “Best Real Estate Deal of the Year.”⁵⁸ The article that appeared in the journal at the time of the prize describes the “very bright, forward, progressive feeling” that many of the new residents feel when they see “vacant buildings being torn down or fixed up. Rowhouses being gutted. Dumpsters being filled up and hauled away.”⁵⁹ While repairing old houses certainly has the potential to be a good thing, the article consistently presents the neighborhood as both negative and empty. In fact, the only mention of the neighborhood’s history comes in a single sentence about how the neighborhood had thrived in the nineteenth century; but, “in the late 20th century, was known more for its many problems: high crime, a depleted residential base and, eventually, a whole lot of abandoned buildings.”⁶⁰ The only community mentioned as living in Brewerytown is the new “instant community” that has formed among the residents of Brewerytown Square, which one new resident describes as “a great community. We all get along. We have this sense of being pioneers, because it’s almost historic living here.”⁶¹ The article never questions this notion that the young urban professionals moving into Brewerytown might not in fact be “pioneers” taming the wild of the unclaimed urban frontier but are in fact entering a neighborhood populated by a historic African-American community that, despite having shrunk dramatically, still occupies two out of every three nearby houses.

While one would not particularly expect a business magazine awarding a prize to a gentrifying developer to be concerned with working-class communities, Tom Slater, an urban

⁵⁸ “Best Real Estate Deal Winner: Brewerytown Square.” *Philadelphia Business Journal*. Oct. 24, 2006.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

geographer at the University of Bristol, believes that similar views are becoming increasingly prevalent in academia as well. He writes that mainstream academic discourse has changed dramatically from the late 1980s when most academics who wrote about gentrification did so “in response to the clear injustice of the displacement of working-class residents and the far from innocent role of both public and private institutions.”⁶² Although the term “gentrification” is “still something of a ‘dirty word,’” Slater believes that the dominant “perception is no longer about rent increases, landlord harassment and working-class displacement, but rather street-level spectacles, trendy bars and cafes, i-Pods, social diversity and funky clothing outlets.”⁶³ As the focus of academic gentrification increasingly centers on what Slater calls the “continuing embourgeoisement of central city locations,”⁶⁴ the history and problems of the working-class communities who occupy these locations shift out of focus.

One of the factors that Slater identifies as having caused this transformation in the discourse over gentrification is the rise of a belief that mixed-income neighborhoods are better for poor people than neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. There probably is some validity to the idea that Brewerytown Square will lead to a certain amount of local job creation, particularly in services that cater to the new residents. However, it will also lead to drastically increased rents as property values in the area rise that may well become unaffordable to people who have lived in the neighborhood for years. Although Brewerytown Square did not directly displace any residents’ homes, Slater writes that similar “new-build residential developments – built on formerly working-class industrial space – which are off limits to the working classes... have acted like beachheads from which the tentacles of gentrification have slowly stretched into the

⁶² Slater, Tom. “The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* Vol. 30.4. Dec. 2006.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Id. 738

adjacent neighborhoods.”⁶⁵ He writes that instead of praising developments like Brewerytown Square that bring affluent residents into disadvantaged areas, we must come to see them as “neither the opposite of nor the remedy for urban ‘decay.’ ”⁶⁶ Slater rejects the idea that neighborhoods like Brewerytown must choose between “*either* unlivable disinvestment and decay *or* reinvestment and displacement.”⁶⁷ While he does not offer a clear and comprehensive vision for a third option that would enable the revitalization of the neighborhood without displacing the black community, he says that we must “find ways to work outside, wherever possible, the ball and chain of market transactions and insist on the human and moral right that is adequate and affordable housing.”⁶⁸ In the next chapter, I discuss some of the ways that community groups in Brewerytown have organized to assert this right and participate in the economic decisions affecting their community.

⁶⁵ Id. 745

⁶⁶ Id. 752

⁶⁷ Id. 753

⁶⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE COMMUNITY

PART ONE: *DETERMINING LEADERSHIP*

It sometimes seems that members of the low-income, African-American community in Brewerytown are in an almost impossible situation. On the one hand, there are few economic opportunities in their neighborhood, and it will clearly take some degree of urban revitalization for the violence in the area to subside. On the other hand, while high-end housing developments like Brewerytown Square may spark that revitalization, for-profit developers like Westrum show little regard for the surrounding community and have few qualms about causing rents in the area to rise to levels that will be unaffordable for the current residents. In order for local activists to be successful therefore, they must figure out a way to counter these developers' claims that Brewerytown is simply a dilapidated, formerly industrial shell of a landscape waiting to be bulldozed while still working to bring about real changes. To do this, they must show that their community is vibrant, functional and entitled to a say in what happens in the neighborhood. For those without the necessary economic capital to have a right to the land through legal ownership, organizing to establish this right through grassroots action may be their only avenue. Truly, the battle over gentrification in Philadelphia is being fought as much with words and stories as it is with contracts and deeds.

But in order for these organizations to have power, they must appear to "speak for" the communities that they work to represent even though these communities are often too diverse and complex for there to be a single unified voice for such organizations to embody. An interview that I conducted with Andrew Frishkoff, the Neighborhood Economic Development

Director of NTI,⁶⁹ shed some light on this issue. Frishkoff does not fit the picture that some radical community activists like to draw of city officials who are in bed with developers and care little about low-income communities of color like Brewerytown. Rather, Frishkoff has spent most of his professional career working in community organizing and activism for the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and the Empowerment Zone, a federal program that directed grant money into developing some of Philadelphia's poorest neighborhoods. Frishkoff has an informed understanding of the concerns of disadvantaged communities but also sees the need for development in rundown neighborhoods like Brewerytown. He described Brewerytown as a poorly organized community without a clear democratic process and explained that he often has to use his personal judgment to decide which community voices there to listen to most. David Lafontaine, one of the leaders of Community Ventures a non-profit organization developing affordable housing in Philadelphia, spoke along similar lines, stating that in many underprivileged communities in Philadelphia the organizations with the most power are those that "yell the loudest" or have the strongest ties to the local city councilman.⁷⁰ As such, the interests that such organizations actually end up representing often have more to do with the personal self-interest of their leaders and their ability to express that interest than with a real unified opinion in the community itself.

Brewerytown community activist Al Alston offers an example of a grassroots activist working to establish legitimacy as a player in the development of Philadelphia. Alston emerged as a community activist in the area in 2002 as a leader in the successful campaign to prevent the construction of a McDonald's Restaurant at the Brewerytown intersection of 27th St. and Girard

⁶⁹ Interview in Person with Andrew Frishkoff, , the Neighborhood Economic Development Director of NTI. November 2007.

⁷⁰ Interview in Person with David Lafontaine of Community Ventures. November 2007.

Avenue ⁷¹. In 1996, a Shop ‘n’ Bag super market that had been at the site for many years closed its doors for good, leaving residents looking to buy groceries no choice but to leave their neighborhood by car, bus or taxi. City efforts to find a new super market willing to take the spot proved unsuccessful: “City Councilman Darrell Clarke and state Rep. Frank Oliver both heard the complaints and brought five different groups of investors to look at the site. None, they say, liked the location.” ⁷² In the summer of 2002, McDonald’s began making plans to build a restaurant at the location and did little to publicize their progress in the surrounding community of residents, many of whom were opposed to it as they still hoped that a super market would come through. In a *Philadelphia Weekly* article from this time, Alston described feeling “‘devastated’ when a withered poster indicated a McDonald’s zoning board hearing had been held three weeks earlier. So he printed up 500 fliers for local activists’ grandchildren to slide under doors within a six-block radius.” ⁷³

Within a few days, the grassroots mobilization grew to “about 80 people--white and black, from both the north [majority black] and south [majority white] sides of Girard” and began to refer to themselves as the Girard Avenue Alliance (GAA).⁷⁴ When I interviewed Bob Seabury, one of the original members of the GAA, he described the social dynamics of this cross-community organization.⁷⁵ He said that there was a wide variety of tasks that needed to happen including getting legal advice, passing out fliers and calling in phone trees, and people participated in the ways that they wanted to and could. The organizers recognized that they were working to organize a community in which there were wide disparities in education and tried

⁷¹ Hickey, Brian. “Foldin’ Arches?” in *Philadelphia Weekly* – October 16th, 2002.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Interview in Person with President of West Girard Community Council Bob Seabury

hard to find different ways for people to participate. Unsurprisingly, the distribution of tasks in the organization came to reflect the differences in privilege and skill in the population. For one thing, the organization depended on its members for advice, and the members who had sufficient relevant experience with the legal system and the local government to offer this advice were more often than not highly educated. Also, as the organization never incorporated as a non-profit or even applied for any grants, the entire fiscal burden fell on the members, who provided all of the funds for publicity and legal expenses through voluntary donations. Although the claim that the GAA was a truly cross-community movement is central to the image that the organization worked to cultivate for themselves, the leadership probably reflected this structure of privilege. It seems likely that the organization's Steering Committee had much higher proportions of white people, college-educated people and people with money to spare than the surrounding Brewerytown community. Out of the ten or fifteen people who sat on this committee and met regularly in a local church on Thursday nights to organize the campaign, Seabury could only remember two or three who were black.

This is not to say that disadvantaged Brewerytown residents were not represented, but rather, that the representation that they had came in the form of members of their community of a higher social status. Al Alston, one of the two founding members of GAA and the current leader of the African-American Business and Residents Association, offers an example. Although Alston grew up in the neighborhood, he went on to receive a degree from Princeton University and worked for several years as a computer scientist for Microsoft before returning home to work as a community organizer.⁷⁶ When I spoke with him on the phone, it was clear that he was a dedicated and hard-working activist strongly committed to what he perceives to be the best

⁷⁶ Shaffer, Gwen. "Strange Brew." *Philadelphia Weekly*. Aug. 10, 2005.

interest of the African-American community in Brewerytown.⁷⁷ But, as I found out when I spoke with other community leaders in Brewerytown, Alston's strong opposition to much of the development being proposed in the neighborhood is far from unanimous. While I do not doubt that he believes himself to be doing the right thing, the fact remains that his education and professional career differentiate him from most residents of Brewerytown and give him a different perspective on the events unfolding in the neighborhood. Ultimately, Alston offers a clear example of how difficult it can be to determine who is entitled to speak for communities in which many people lack the education and ability to speak for themselves in the ways in which people in power are prepared to listen.

PART TWO: *CONFLICTING VOICES*

Returning to the example of the GAA's campaign against McDonald's, to make a long story short, it was successful. Within a few weeks, they had won an appeal in Common Pleas court halting construction on the grounds that the prior authorization was invalid as the initial hearings had not been adequately advertised in the surrounding neighborhood as required by law.⁷⁸ Although a judge over-turned this appeal several months later, the community mobilization was powerful enough to stop construction yet again for a final time. In the interview with Andrew Frishkoff, he explained the magnitude of what the campaign accomplished, stating that Mayor Ed Rendell, who served from 1991 to 1999, had worked out a mutually supportive relationship with McDonald's that included helping them get new sites, which continued, albeit to a lesser degree, under Mayor Street. As such, the Girard Avenue Alliance was organizing against a private interest with strong ties to the municipal government. Interestingly, at the same time as this campaign was happening in Brewerytown, Frishkoff said that a similar grassroots

⁷⁷ Interview by Telephone with Community Activist Al Alston

⁷⁸ Hickey, Brian. "Fast-Food Fury" in *Philadelphia Weekly* – January 1st, 2003.

mobilization against the construction of a McDonald's restaurant that was happening in West Philadelphia also ended in victory. Although the West Philadelphia campaign's arguments rested on environmental grounds, not improperly acquired zoning permits, both instances offer examples of neighborhood groups successfully mobilizing sufficient political capital to influence the municipal government. Frishkoff explained how, at first, both constructions had been met with approval and support from the mayor's office, and "it was only when resistance was really mobilized on the grassroots level that some of the key politically connected people said 'We can't support this.'" ⁷⁹

In some ways, this campaign was relatively simple. Private interests wanted to develop something in the neighborhood that a sizeable portion of the community was opposed to, and community activists were able to mobilize the social capital of this opposition into a political force powerful enough to make the city government stop the private interest. However, although it appeared on the surface of it that the approval for the construction was rescinded because the activists proved that the original approval procedure had been handled incorrectly, the credence given to this story actually resulted from the activists' political strength, not their proving that something different had happened than originally thought. In fact, the activists were not the first to find that McDonald's had failed to publicize the original Zoning Board hearings: an L & I report from the original hearing "confirms [that] a sign wasn't properly posted on one side of the lot as required by law." ⁸⁰ In other words, the city knew from the beginning that McDonald's had failed to adequately inform the community about the construction, but the city had been willing to overlook this fact. As the campaign progressed with the permit being repealed, reinstated and repealed again, the facts of the case appear to have changed little. The Girard

⁷⁹ Interview with Andrew Frishkoff – Friday, November 9, 2007.

⁸⁰ Hickey, Brian. "Fast-Food Fight" in *Philadelphia Weekly* – February 5th, 2003.

Avenue Alliance therefore succeeded not by changing the story about what had happened but by changing how it was perceived: the same act of negligence went from being an ignorable slip in compliance with the zoning code to being an egregious denial of a disadvantaged community's self-determination. The GAA could not change what had happened, but they could change the way that enough people understood what had happened for the necessary city officials to have no choice but to respond and rescind their original decision.

In a similar way, much of the struggle around Westrum Development's large-scale development in Brewerytown has relied on trying to change how people understand what is happening. Both Westrum and anti-gentrification activists like Alston and the organization he works with, the African-American Business and Residents Association (AABRA), have stories about what is happening in Brewerytown that they work hard to convince people of. However, as the situation of gentrification is not unique to Brewerytown, neither are the stories that each side is telling. In his article about the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, David Wilson describes some of these myths that the different actors in gentrification struggles use to justify their stances, and, for the most part, his descriptions fit the discourse unfolding in Brewerytown today to a tee.

Wilson begins by describing the stories that developers tell about these neighborhoods, arguing that "icons that contradicted portrayal of scarred space (positive street life, constructive social relations, coherent families, tranquil kids, decent schools) were obliterated."⁸¹ As described in the last chapter, Westrum often tries to do the same thing because presenting Brewerytown as monolithically devastated and deplorable removes the possibility that the development could have any adverse effects. In a community newsletter from July 15, 2007,

⁸¹ Id. at 1181.

AABRA accuses John Westrum, the President of Westrum Development Co., of having done just this at a conference about urban development at Temple's Fox School of Business when he said, "I don't want to hear anything more about gentrification. I prefer to use the term unslumming."⁸² The article goes on to condemn the conference as "little more than a bitter, anti-community, self-congratulatory performance where nothing, save an unintended clarion call, was accomplished."⁸³ The article essentially argues that by effectively excluding community members and activists from participating in the conference and presenting positive views of Brewerytown, the hegemonic myth of gentrification as "unslumming" was able to successfully go unchallenged.

While AABRA is certainly correct in their claim that Westrum is trying to promote a certain story about what he is doing, AABRA themselves, like any activist organization, is no less guilty of propagating myths than Westrum is. Although Brewerytown is obviously a profoundly troubled neighborhood, in order for AABRA to establish that there is something of value at risk of being displaced, they must spread stories about the neighborhood being the vibrant home of a thriving community. To that end, the second half of the article consists of quotations from residents arguing against the idea that they live in a "slum":

"Helen Deloris, a resident of the same Brewerytown home since 1953, offered 'This neighborhood is no slum! This is a good neighborhood and I enjoy living here. The state Rep lives right across the street, two preachers live on the corner. And, if it was so bad, why would so many people want to move here?'"

Resident Ella Handsome said 'There are unsightly areas. But, the majority of the people are homeowners who maintain their properties, beautify the area, bring up the neighborhood. We have our share of problems, but I don't live in anyone's slum.'"⁸⁴

⁸² "John Westrum Calls Brewerytown 'Slum'" in *AABRA Update – Vol. 4 #7b – July 15, 2007.*

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

The article concludes with the musing, “Perhaps Westrum’s suburban background makes it difficult for him to differentiate between a functioning, courageous African-American community and a vile, base slum. In any event, he has indicated a profound disrespect for Brewerytown residents.”⁸⁵

This image of Westrum as disrespectful and inconsiderate of the Brewerytown community is a perfect example of the story that Wilson claims that activists often use to discredit developers, writing that activists tend to present developers as “persistent, community-destroying entrepreneurs [who] relentlessly comb landscapes to find best-profit opportunities.”⁸⁶ By casting the situation as “us vs. them,” anti-gentrification activists work to rally local residents to come together to oppose the invading gentrifiers who are trying to “wreak” working-class communities for personal gain. As AABRA offers in their September 2007 newsletter, “others have declared a kind of economic and cultural war on us.”⁸⁷ Presented as such, the only reasonable action for a Brewerytown resident to take is to join forces with AABRA and “defend” the neighborhood against the oncoming attack at any cost.

PART THREE: *GETTING ALONG*

Unfortunately for AABRA, not all members of the Brewerytown community see things their way and some even support new development. One example is Mario Presta who came to Brewerytown from Italy twenty years ago and has had a successful career in the neighborhood both as the owner of a local Italian restaurant and as a small-time real estate developer. Since 1998, Presta has also served as the president of the West Girard Business Association (WGBA),

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Wilson, David et. al. “Successful Protect-Community Discourse: Spatiality and Politics in Chicago’s Pilsen Neighborhood” in *Environment and Planning*: 2004, vol. 36. P1178.

⁸⁷ “Whispers of Fear, Hate & The Planned Takeover of North Philly” in *AABRA Update!-Vol. 4 No. 9* – September 1, 2007

an association of 40 local businesses located along the section of Girard Avenue that runs between Fairmount and Brewerytown. I met with him at the WGBA office to talk about the ways that he believes that the neighborhood is changing.⁸⁸

As Presta sees it, Center City is currently expanding (its northern boundary has already extended from Spring Garden St. up to Fairmount Ave.), and he hopes that within a few years it will extend even farther to include Girard Ave. He strongly supports development in the area and is a big fan of the Westrum project, which he believes will bring hundreds of families into the area, bolstering the local economy and beautifying the neighborhood. When I raised the issue of displacement of local residents who might be forced out by this development, Presta said that he simply did not believe in that and pointed to the abundance of vacant houses as proof that the neighborhood could take in many newcomers without having to force anyone out. It is not difficult to see how Presta's view of development could be self-serving. The houses that he is fixing up in the area will be more profitable if the neighborhood gentrifies and real estate prices increase. Likewise, many of the small restaurants and stores in the WGBA will see increased revenues if new people move into the neighborhood and spend money. But people like Presta are more complicated than simply greedy businessmen.

For one thing, Presta honestly cares about his community. He showed me photographs that he'd taken of young children playing in nearby trash-strewn abandoned lots and made it clear that he truly wanted the neighborhood to be healthier and safer. In fact, in 1999, Presta organized an effort to clean up a number of empty lots in Brewerytown. Although he received some support from the city government's Philadelphia More Beautiful Committee, a volunteer

⁸⁸ Interview in Person with Mario Presta of West Girard Business Association

network under the auspices of the Streets Department,⁸⁹ Presta paid the volunteers who helped him clean the lots out of his own pocket. While any action taken to improve the neighborhood has the potential to raise property values, it would be a serious mistake to project utterly selfish intentions onto the hard work that Presta has done to clean up his neighborhood.

In fact, despite the fact that renovating rundown houses tends to increase the rents and taxes on the other properties on the street, Presta said that, by and large, local residents have supported his development efforts. He said that most of the residents that he knows appreciate it when their streets are cleaner, safer and more attractive and that he does not see anything wrong with their having to pay \$100 more in real-estate taxes as a result of making them that way. Neighborhood development is not an easy or simple issue, and it is likely that, in addition to there being a wide diversity of options in the community, most Brewerytown residents feel somewhat ambivalent about it. While low rents are certainly helpful to poor families struggling to make ends meet, it is difficult to argue against somebody picking up trash or a neighbor repainting his house.

As such, the radical stances that groups like AABRA and GAA sometimes take in the name of the entire community usually represent only a subset of interests as the community is simply too diverse to stand behind them unilaterally. While Presta had little to do with the Girard Avenue Alliance's campaign against McDonald's, he was aware of the campaign and told me a story about an interaction that he had with them. At one point in the campaign, GAA decided to organize a street carnival on Girard Avenue to raise funds and awareness about their campaign. According to Presta, their plan was to close the street and have local shopkeepers each pay \$100 to put a table out on the street selling their goods. A problem arose, however,

⁸⁹ <http://www.phila.gov/STREETS/pmbc.html>

with the fact that GAA had planned the action themselves without very much input from the businesses along the street. When Presta heard about the event shortly before it was scheduled to happen, he contacted everyone he could think of and organized a meeting just one day before the carnival was to be held. Of the businesses that Presta had been elected to represent, only one was in support of closing the street. The strongest opposition came from a dialysis center that feared that closing the street would prevent them from caring for their patients. In addition, the police were not prepared to close the large stretch of the street that GAA's plan called for. In the end, however, the different stakeholders were able to agree on half of a block that could be closed and the event went on as planned.

It is easy to think of GAA or AABRA as the "capital-P" People of Fairmount and Brewerytown rising together in solidarity to oppose a corporate interest from invading their neighborhood. But while there is certainly some truth to this myth, Presta's story indicates the severe difference between a movement in line with the opinions of the majority of people in a community and a movement democratically structured to include the members of that community in its decision-making process. While Presta conceded that most people in the community were against building the McDonald's, their reasons for that stance and their level of dedication to preventing the construction varied widely. In the interview with Bob Seabury, one of the leaders of the movement against McDonald's, Seabury explained that whereas the Brewerytown residents, by and large, opposed the construction because they wanted to see the site used as a supermarket, most of the Fairmount residents opposed it on aesthetic and cultural grounds. Unlike many of the local residents, Presta and the WGBA, on the other hand, had little problem with McDonald's because they support the growth of all businesses on the avenue that bring jobs to the neighborhood. When I asked Presta if he distinguished between corporate

franchises and family-owned businesses, he said that he didn't. As long as the business cultivates the kind of friendly and comfortable atmosphere that Presta would like to see on the avenue and does not have hostile features like large bullet-proof glass barricades between the salespeople and the customers, Presta and many other local residents who are eager to see changes in their neighborhood welcome their construction and growth.

While I do not agree with some of what Presta said, and, in particular, question his disbelief that some residents might be displaced by the new developments happening in Brewerytown, the interview with him was among the most valuable pieces of research that went into shaping this paper. Presta has been a member of the Brewerytown community for many years and is unquestionably dedicated both to the small businesses that the WGBA represents and to the wellbeing of the members of his neighbors. Yet he is also a strong advocate in support of a number of real-estate developments that other voices in the Brewerytown community are eager to condemn as gentrification. Whereas many of the other supporters of these developments justify their support through the use of narratives that either ignore or distort the existence of the Brewerytown community, Presta does neither: his support is not in spite of this community, it is out of love for this community. While it would be a mistake to assume that his perspective is somehow more in line with the majority of Brewerytown residents than that of Al Alston, it is enough to make one seriously doubt any activist arrogant enough to claim to speak for the entirety of a community.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

After decades defined by the deterioration and abandonment of Brewerytown's building stock and a population that has been steadily shrinking since 1960, Brewerytown Square does mark a resurgence of investment in the area and may well signify a turn toward revitalization for the neighborhood. But this transformation may not come without some potentially negative consequences for the area's poorer residents.

As the chapter on the history of Brewerytown showed, when many of the original black residents first moved to the area in the 1940s and 1950s, they came with the hope for better lives for their families than those that they had in the south; and, up until about 1970, Brewerytown did make serious strides toward fulfilling those dreams. Throughout this thirty years, unemployment rates dropped (from 21.9% in 1940 to 4.1% in 1970) and rates of homeownership among black residents increased significantly. This is not to say that things were great for black people at that time, they certainly were not, or that things like red-lining or the riots of 1969 should be overlooked, but they were getting better. During this time, Brewerytown was becoming an increasingly strong black urban community. What ravaged the neighborhood in the following years was not the community that lived there, but the severe loss of jobs in Philadelphia over this period of time.

Today, although much of this community still remains in Brewerytown, their needs are not being considered in the policy decisions that affect them to the extent that they deserve. Instead, as the chapter on the developer showed, developers like Westrum are deciding to build in Brewerytown for economic, social and geographical reasons that have little to do with this community. As such, the ways that these developers present what they are doing tends to either ignore or condemn the surrounding neighborhood as a derelict wasteland of little value and

therefore of little loss should the people who live there be displaced. As the chapter about the community showed, this puts the local residents in a difficult situation. Those who choose to try to fight back against these developers soon find that they have little more than words fueling their often futile battle. Others in the community feel that the developments may bring about some of the revitalization that the neighborhood needs so badly and end up supporting it wholeheartedly. Ultimately, only time will tell what the future will bring this community.

Figure One: Brewerytown Population Changes by Race

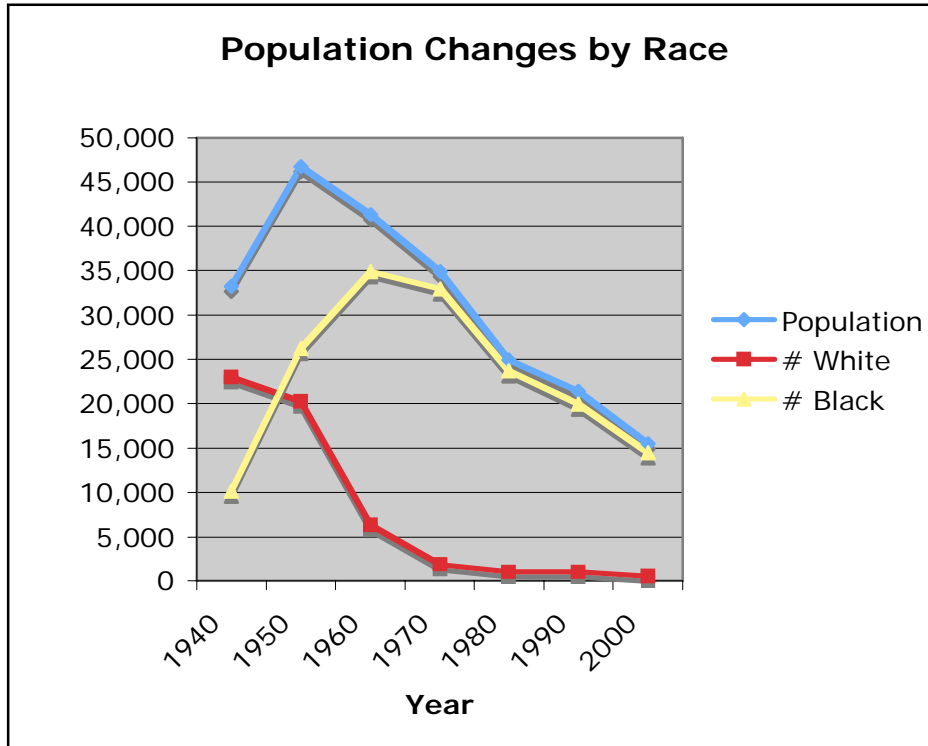


Figure Two: Changes in Brewerytown

	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Population	33,216	46,758	41,298	34,884	24,943	21,411	15,483
# White	22,998	20,241	6,353	1,886	1,039	1,008	513
% White	69.2%	43.3%	15.4%	5.4%	4.2%	4.8%	3.3%
# Black	10,176	26,241	34,872	32,898	23,695	19,979	14,463
% Black	30.6%	56.6%	84.4%	94.3%	95%	94.5%	93.4%
% 14+ in workforce	57.1%	55%	58%	52.7%	37.9%	42.4%	46.9%
% Un-Employed	21.9%	8.5%	7.2%	4.1%	20.9%	21.6%	17.1%
Vacancy	7.9%	2.8%	6.8%	6.4%	17.3%	24.2%	27.7%
Owner-Occupied	23.7%	39.5%	42.2%	34.4%	43.6%	47.4%	48%

Both figures are derived entirely from data compiled by the United States Bureau of the Census in the National Census of the stated year.

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