

A Brief History of Urban Renewal and Displacement in Providence's former West Elmwood neighborhood

This material was compiled from Lucy Boltz' undergraduate thesis, *Grafting Memory*.

Most old-timers used specific images to pull me into the atmosphere of the neighborhood-- the fruit trees, the baseball leagues, pulling frogs out of the creeks, swimming in the pond, throwing rocks at the neighbor's loose dog. These memories convey what the loss meant—a loss of community fabric that was not so easy to rebuild (Boltz 39).

“In the mid 1950's Providence's economy was transitioning to trucking from rail and redevelopers referred to the highway system as a “skeleton,” upon which they would build a new body. Planners began to consider the neighborhood near the Dennis J. Roberts Expressway, (now Route 10) an attractive site for manufacturing. **This neighborhood, called by many names—Across the Tracks, Over the Bridge, a part of West Elmwood and the West End—presents legacies of urban renewal, a changed landscape and bitter displacement.**

What happens to a community when the neighborhood has been paved over and exists only in memory?

This story is one of many. **Between 1949 and 1979, American urban renewal plans displaced and dispossessed an estimated one million people in 2,500 neighborhoods in 993 cities across the U.S.** Mindy Thompson Fullilove wrote that urban renewal often affected black people disproportionately. She described this process as a traumatic experience or a “root shock,” which destroyed emotional ecosystems” (Boltz 2).

“Planners imagined or saw progress in highway aesthetics, and redesigned downtowns, often aimed at the suburban consumer and commuter. Neighborhood redevelopment was part of this concern with revamping declining cities and deteriorating housing with a modern aesthetic. **Unfortunately, concern was not given to local people's needs or knowledge.** Planners mapped future highway routes and reconfigured the map along new neighborhood lines. **For kids, naming the neighborhood and the city may have been influenced by playing on the sand dunes, burning leaves in a burn bucket in the back yard, playing in the creek. . . :**

So I used to go there constantly I couldn't wait for the summer for the weather to get warm because I used to go swimming. So I had some good experiences in the Mashapaug Pond and in the Gorhams Area all around there because I used to go there and see the fish swimming in the water-Wilbur Jennings.¹

“For parents in the neighborhood, the priority may have been keeping a neighborhood where they were first able to pay a mortgage and own a home, keeping a mixed neighborhood in the city. **It is important here to remember that these differences in perspectives on what the city's neighborhoods should be called or how the city's neighborhoods should be organized exist within a framework of power: who has the power to name, to organize, to map, to move, to own”** (Boltz 16).

City Planners labeled Mashapaug Pond a “slum,” an example of “urban blight”

“Mabel Walker, who was writing in 1938, wrote about these two terms:

A slum is a residential area with an extreme condition of blight. The slum is relatively easy to locate and define. **There seems to be general agreement that it is an area in which the housing is so unfit as to constitute a menace to health and morals of the community, and that the slum is essentially of social significance.²**

¹ Wilbur Jennings, interview by Lucy Boltz, 3 Dec 2011, Mashapaug Collection, Digital Repository, http://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/collections/id_617.

² Walker, Mabel L., *Urban Blight and Slums: Economic and Legal Factors in Their Origin, Reclamation and Prevention*, (Cambridge:

Immediately, he ties the housing character to moral and social characters” (23).

“In the Mashapaug Pond Feasibility Plan, paid for by the Providence Redevelopment Agency, analysts collected data on the neighborhood pertaining to “evidence of social disturbances which could lead to social breakdown.” These included welfare recipient rates, tuberculosis, venereal disease, and juvenile delinquency.³ **This grouping of characteristics degraded the neighborhood by associating the neighborhood with moral depravity. Moreover, these value and moral-laden measurements were hardly meaningful since three out of four measurements did not differ substantially from the citywide rates”** (Boltz 24).

“By the summer of 1960, the PRA had already displaced 3,600 people in a number of projects which touched areas all over the city. The projects included Point Street (in Downtown) Willard Center One, Willard Center Two (in Upper South Providence), West River (in the East Side), Lippitt Hill (on the East Side), Central Classical (in the West End), East Side (in Fox Point), Railroad Relocation (Downtown), Mount Hope (on the East Side), Federal Hill (in Federal Hill), and West Broadway (in the West End) and soon Weybosset Hill (in Downtown)⁴” (Boltz 27).

Counter perspectives:

The interviews with people who grew up in the neighborhood are alive with the sights, sounds and movements of young adulthood and the excitement and pride of growing up in an integrated, near-rural community just outside of Providence, with access to a space like the Mashapaug pond:

...it was a very very close knit community. We went to school together. We played baseball together. In the winter time, of course the pond was there, my older brother was a hockey player, so he used to ice skate on the pond...In the summer time, you'd see a lot of kids there fishing and so forth. It was just a great community.-Joe Caffrey⁵

So us kids used to go over to the stream and pick the turtles out of the stream because they would get caught up in the branches. They fell under the water. We'd pick German Carp out of the water. Pick them up by your hand. And I'm talking about fish [showing his finger spread apart almost a foot]. A lot to do as far as nature was concerned. And of course we would catch snakes and what not...And probably it was the first integrated neighborhood of home-owners in Providence area. You know it takes a neighborhood to raise a kid. Well it [was] like that. Everyone got along. I had a lot of friends, you know [who] were white, were Caucasian. And [if] their parents told me to do something, we did it. It didn't make any difference whether it was your parent or their parent because we all got along. You know and one of the other things I remember of that neighborhood, it was like the country. Everything was uninhibited.-William Guy⁶

“The families that owned houses near Mashapaug Pond were moderate income and working class or lower middle class. In the city directory of the streets in the neighborhood, occupational listings offer a sense of the make-up the neighborhood. Homeowners are listed with occupations similar to renters. A sample of homeowners include heads of household with occupations such as mail handler, warehouse worker, lab sewage disposal worker, driver, janitor, tool maker, machine operator, smelter, teacher, pantry maid, box

Harvard University Press) 1938. 3

³ Providence City Plan Commission with the assistance of Blair Associates. Conditions of Blights in the Mashapaug Pond Redevelopment Project Area, a Study Prepared for the Providence Redevelopment Agency, Appendix A of the Mashapaug Pond Redevelopment Plan for the Huntington Expressway Industrial Park. a15

⁴ “Mashapaug Dwellers Ask How Much?” The Providence Journal, 8 Sept 1960: 15 Print.

⁵ Joe Caffrey, interview with Lucy Boltz, 25, July 2012.

⁶ William Guy, interview with Lucy Boltz, 7 Nov 2012.

maker, brewing department worker.⁷ (Boltz 34).

*Let me see. What else? A lot of people did factory work. A lot of factories. Metalshaping. Imperial Knife Company. Knives, sheet metal, sharps, some textile mills, yarn companies, the peanut company that bottled and canned peanuts was over there on Elmwood Avenue. I think that was Dexter and Elmwood. And then there was a potato company over there. We were Native so it's a little different lifestyle. My dad did a lot of different types of work. Pretty skilled in a lot of areas. The main thing I remember him doing was truck driving and large truck driver tire repair. It was very dangerous in those days. Split wheel tires. Changed them inside of cages because they often exploded and killed people. So they made these steel cages like a monkey's cage that you'd climb in and disassemble the tires off the rim. There was a lot of guys that died doing that. Risky skill. So they did it in a cage because when it exploded, those metal parts in the rim just went everywhere. **So I remember him doing that- watching him change the tires when my mom would go and see him. Wonder why he was in a cage changing a tire. I found out it didn't make me feel too good. Because I'd only seen people of color doing that.** And he drove a truck which I used to go in with him to shift the gears. He painted, carpentry. That was a highly skilled generation compared to today where people don't know how to do plumbing and carpentry all at once. I think that was just what they did. **Think about it today- pretty good. I have carpentry, plumbing, electrical- all those skills because he taught me.** -Darrell Waldron⁸*

Comparison with the Lippitt Hill Redevelopment & Displacement:

“Lippitt Hill was a strong point of reference in interviews. **The outcome of the Lippitt Hill Project impacted how members of the minority (Black, Cape Verdean and Native) community considered their chances when making their case to be able to stay**” (Boltz, 41).

“Lippitt Hill Neighborhood resistance was not heeded. Providence planners were so adamant about building a shopping center—what would be called University Heights—that they rebuffed the federal government when it declined their application for a grant to fund the project.” (Boltz 46).

*Clearing this area [Lippitt Hill] meant more than five thousand people would be forced to permanently relocate. Because of the policies of discrimination practice by the majority of real estate agents, many of these people moved to the area where there was least resistance to blacks: South Providence. **As one could readily guess this practice created more of a ghetto in the already crowded area. It was feared that there would be little chance of some of these residents returning to the Lippitt Hill area to purchase a house or rent an apartment when the development was completed. In either case, the cost would be prohibitive and beyond the budget of many families.** -Andrew Bell¹⁰*

Racism in Housing: Policy, The Law and Mashapaug Pond

“The Urban League and the NAACP were continually speaking out about the problem of racial discrimination in housing. The local Providence chapter of the NAACP was endeavoring to push a Fair Housing Bill through the statehouse. By September 1960, George Lima, the NAACP chapter’s Cape Verdean president, tied the housing campaign explicitly to the Mashapaug Pond Project. The NAACP chapter met with Mayor Reynolds to demand a halt to the Mashapaug Project “until an adequate relocation program is put forth.” **They used this issue to call for an Open Occupancy Ordinance to be passed in the city to make more adequate housing available to non-whites. The NAACP would consider seeking an injunction against the Providence Redevelopment Agency if the Mashapaug Plan went through with the current relocation plan.** The plan

⁷ City Directory, 1960, PCA.

⁸ Darrel Waldron, interview with Lucy Boltz, 1 Nov 2012.

⁹ “Plan Revised on Lippitt Hill Redevelopment Unit Gives Up Proposal for Shopping Center,” The Providence Journal, 14 Feb 1958:19, Print.

¹⁰ Bell Jr, *An Assesment*, 81.

included unreasonable caveats, including one that offered to compensate families for relocation costs, but only if tenants remained until the date of property condemnation.”¹¹ (Boltz 89).

“Jesse L Connor and four other Black residents filed suit in January of 1961 against the Providence Redevelopment Agency to halt condemnation of the neighborhood. They argued that condemnation and displacement would unrightfully expose them to the adverse effects of a racially discriminatory housing market in Providence and in Rhode Island. **At the trial to hear Connor’s case, George Lima, representing the NAACP chapter and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, testified about the pervasiveness of racial discrimination in housing by citing a “survey of 100 rentable properties of which 97 percent said they would not rent to non-whites”**¹² (Boltz 93).

“Dwight Wilson, community organization secretary for the Urban League, testified before Superior Court Judge Fred B. Perkins in the lawsuit case brought by Black Mashapaug residents that housing discrimination against Negroes did in fact exist in Providence and was perpetuated by Relocation Services’ practices of maintaining dual housings listings—one available to whites and another for non-whites.¹³ David Joyce responded to these complaints by stating that, “although his agency does not condone discrimination ‘morally, legally or otherwise,’ the requests of landowners are honored by the agency and they will be in the future.”¹⁴ **The day after these arguments were presented, Judge Perkins ruled that the hardship afforded some were “incidental to and not the purpose” of the Redevelopment Act of 1956, approving the neighborhood’s condemnation**¹⁵ (Boltz 94).

“Some people in the neighborhood moved to just outside the clearance area, to another part of the West End. Some moved just over the border to the city of Cranston with some continuing to work in Providence. Finding out where people moved to if they did not move to Cranston or stay in Providence is a pain-staking task” (Boltz 109).

In total 567 homes were demolished for the construction of the 117-acre industrial park. Currently, thirty-three different companies are listed as tenants of the Huntington Industrial Park employing a total of 814 people.¹⁶

*I think a lot of people pretty much felt that the neighborhood that they knew, the friends that they knew, they weren't going to see anymore. Split up. You're going here. You're going there. And in Providence, to go to Warwick, people perceive that as going a long way... **They didn't know where they were going to go. They were going to end up some place. And now even the factories that eventually went in there, there isn't factories no more. You know the area was to be predominantly industrial, Boom! That's it, nothing else.** –Ed Hooks¹⁷*

¹¹ “NAACP Here Will Seek Project Delay,” The Providence Journal, 23 Sept 1960:22 Print.

¹² “Mashapaug Pond Plat Action is Delayed,” The Providence Journal, 4 Jan 1961:6 Print.

¹³ “Mashapaug Pond Plat Action is Delayed,” Providence Journal, 4 Jan 1961 [newspaper article cut out is mislabeled in handwritten Urban League archiving as 1960] img 4766

¹⁴ Ibid, “Plat Action Delayed”

¹⁵ “Move to Balk Mashapaug Area Clearing Fails,” The Providence Journal, 5 Jan 1961: 1 Print.

¹⁶ Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation. “Select Business and Industrial Parks in Rhode Island with Tenants.” February 2010. Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation. October 7, 2011. <http://www.riedc.com/node/2851>

¹⁷ Ed Hooks, interview with Lucy Boltz, 23 July 2012.