Performing Community 2

Short Essays on Community, Diversity, Inclusion, and the Performing Arts

By Blair Ruble

Wilson Center

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Wilson Center's Urban Sustainability Laboratory has long promoted holistic views of cities as places of promise. Whether sponsoring discussions about expanding peri-urban communities in Africa, innovative housing in Latin America, or new smart transit systems in Asia, the Center's urban programming has sought to embed the discussion of specific urban challenges in larger conversations about community, governance, and transparency. Our approach to the urban condition very much aligns with the intention of United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11 advocating for cities that are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

The Laboratory began posting short essays about these themes by Director Blair A. Ruble in 2012. By 2015, a sufficient number had appeared to be gathered in *Performing Community: Short Essays on Community, Diversity, Inclusion, and the Performing Arts.* This first collection included twenty-one essays focusing on the role of the performing arts in community building around the world.

This second collection adds nineteen more recent essays expounding on these previous themes to examine the impact of enduring change, the importance of mobility and equality, and the role of the arts in community making.

Writing about Amsterdam, the eminent Dutch novelist, poet, and journalist Cess Nootebom asks what makes a city? His response to his own question offers a broad framework for appreciating why cities are indispensable. For Nootebom, a city consists of

"everything that has been said there, dreamed, destroyed, undertaken. The effected, the disappeared, the imagined that never came to be. The living and the dead. The wooden houses that were torn down or burned, the palaces that might have existed, the bridge which was drawn but never built, the houses still standing where generations have left their memories. But there is much more than that. A city is all the words that have been uttered there, an unceasing never-ending muttering, whispering, singing, and shouting that has resounded through the centuries and been blown away again. This cannot have vanished without having belonged to the city. Even that which is never to be retrieved is part of the city because once, in this place, it was called out or uttered on a winter night or summer morning. The open-field sermon, the verdict of the tribunal, the cry of the flogged, the bidding at an auction, the ordinance, the placard, the discourse, the pamphlet, the death announcement, the calling of the hours, the words of nuns, whores, kings, regents, painters, aldermen, hangmen, shippers, lansquenets, local keepers, and builders, the persistent conversation along the canals in the living body of the city, which is the city. Whoever wishes can hear it."[1]

The purpose of the essays to follow is to help those who want to hear the city in a Nootebomian manner to do so.

As in the first collection, the essays presented here are by Blair Ruble. They have benefited tremendously from the support and contributions of Urban Sustainability Laboratory colleagues Allison Garland, Thea Cooke, Kathy Butterfield, Savannah Boylan and Minh Tran.

Endnote

1   Cess Nooteboom, "Amsterdam," in De Filossof Zonder Ogen [1997], as translated by Manfred Wolf and Virginie Kortekaas in Manfred Wolf, editor, *Amsterdam, A Traveller's Literary Companion* (San Francisco: Whereabouts Press, 2001), pp, 3-4.

Communities and Change
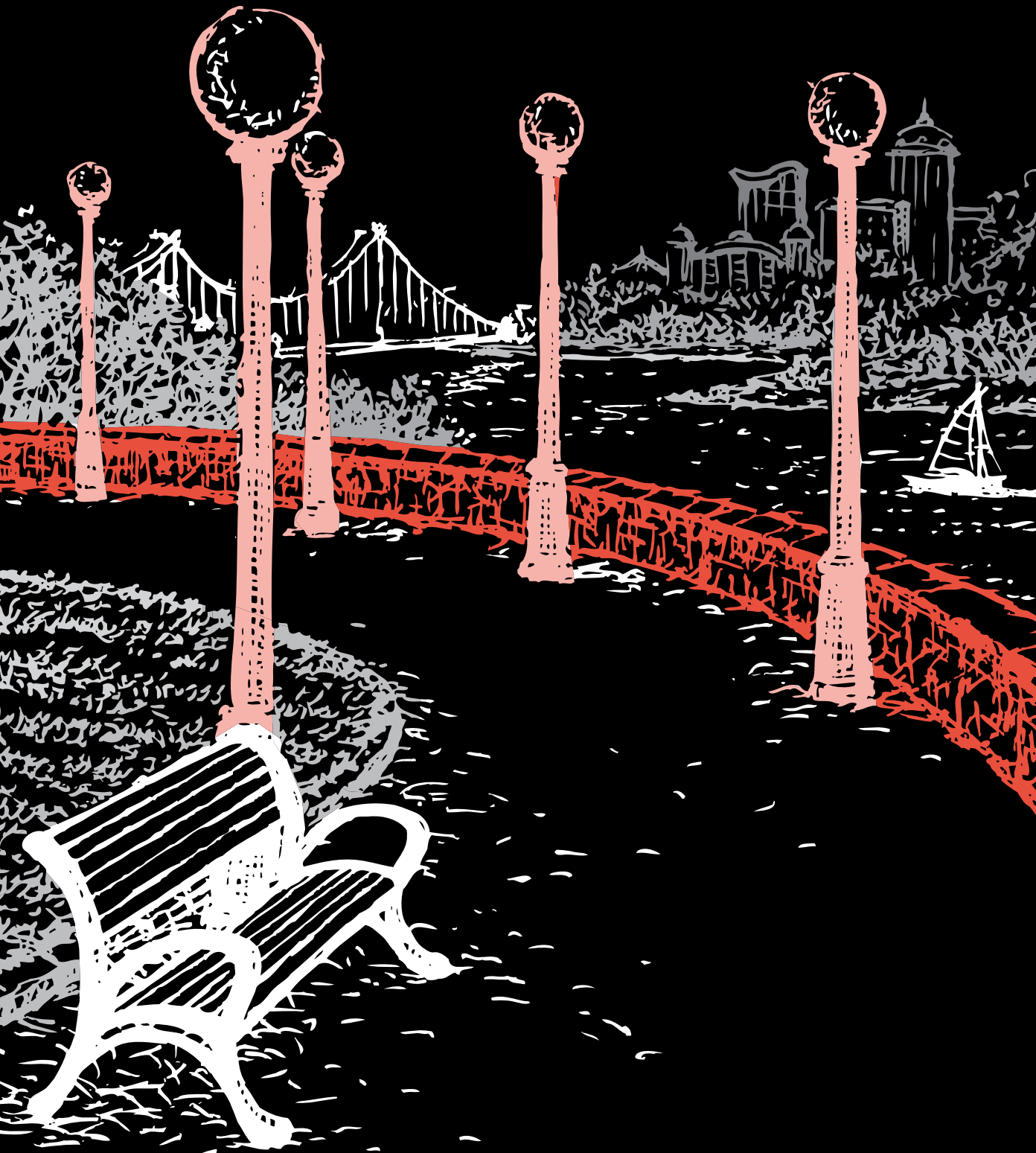
Living Diversity: Documenting Arlington, Virginia's Inclusive, Safe, Resilient, and Sustainable Communities

On September 25, 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals intended to shape UN and other international development strategies and agendas over the next 15 years. The goals replace the previous Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000 to provide a roadmap for engagement with the globe's most vexing development challenges in a holistic manner.

The new strategy explicitly identifies urbanization as a key part of the UN framework for combatting global poverty and inequality. Goal 11 recognizes cities and focal points for ideas, commerce, culture, science, productivity, and social development while simultaneously observing that many challenges strain urban well-being. Therefore, it urges UN actions to "make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable."

Words and exhortations can inspire; to become calls to action they must embrace realizable visions of a new future. What, we may ask, would an "inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" city look like? One answer emerges from the once "suburban" county of Arlington, Virginia across the river from Washington, D.C.

With more than 200,000 residents, Arlington is a small city embedded in a larger metropolitan region which, over the course of the last half century or so, has been transformed from a suburb that was home to segregated populations of Southern whites and blacks to an increasingly urbanized community in which no racial or ethnic group constitutes a minority.

Arlington, in other words, is at the forefront of demographic processes which are changing the face of American communities as well as the United States in its entirety. Arlington is doing so with relatively little rancor as well as with improving economic opportunities and advancements, achieving low crime rates and far-reaching transportation opportunities. Arlington, in other words, reveals how an "inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" city looks.

You don't have to travel to Arlington to see what has happened. The Columbia Pike Documentation Project's new volume, *Living Diversity,*[1] features the works of five remarkable photographers – Lloyd Wolf, Duy Tran, Paula Endo, Xang Mimi Ho, and Aleksandra Lagkueva – who capture the dignified yet casual interaction of people with great cultural differences living next to one another. Inspired by Lloyd – the son

Columbia Pike, Arlington Virginia
Photo courtesy of Brett VA/Flickr

of German immigrants who recalls growing up in Arlington when it was White, Black, and segregated – the photographers reveal that it is possible for people of great difference to be neighbors; and to thrive as they do. This is an important lesson at a time when the world appears to be awash with cities that are divisive, dangerous, vulnerable, and fragile instead of realizing the UN's goal of inclusive safe, resilient and sustainable.

Chartered by an Act of Congress in 1810, the roughly five-mile long Columbia Pike was once a main approach to Washington from the South. Cut off from direct access to the Nation's Capital by the construction of the Pentagon in the 1940s, bypassed by larger more ambitious roads as well as by the Washington Metro System, the Pike remained a corridor of affordable housing and small businesses.

The area began to change rapidly following the fall of Saigon, as those fleeing Communist regimes in Vietnam and neighboring Southeast Asian nations made their way to Arlington. They were followed by Central Americans and Africans fleeing brutal civil wars. Often times, neighbors coexisting peacefully along Columbia Pike had been combatants in wars back home. There was little reason to believe urban harmony was possible. Yet, even then, other groups followed, settling their homes and businesses in the area.

The neighborhood's primary zip code – 22204 – is home to 51,262 residents just over half of whom are white, just under one-fifth Black, and over a quarter Hispanic. A mix of Asians, biracial residents, American Indians, and Hawaiians constitute a multicultural balance. Immigration specialists Audrey Singer of the Brookings Institution and Marie Price of George Washington University rank Columbia Pike's eclectic and hyper-diversity as among the most culturally varied neighborhoods on earth.

As Singer and Price note in their contribution to *Living Diversity*, Columbia Pike's micro-ecosystem is ideal for immigrants to the United States. Newcomers, they suggest, have settled along the Pike as their predecessors have because of its proximity to the urban core, employment opportunities, and relatively inexpensive rental housing. They came from El Salvador, Vietnam, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Peru, and the Philippines. Today, they have been joined by residents from South Asia (India, Bangladesh and Pakistan) as well as Mexicans and Guatemalans creating an ever-changing ethnic landscape.

An important challenge for Arlington – and any urban community trying to follow the UN's guidance to become "inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable" – is that cities are ever-changing. The communities around Columbia Pike are dramatically different from what they once were within single lifetimes. People not only have to adjust to one another, they have to do so within an environment that is continuously evolving.

The ability to constantly recalibrate policies became an underlying component of Arlington's success at responding to rapid demographic change. Columbia Pike's diversity was never planned or foreseen. Local authorities amplified the credits accrued from hyper-density—and minimized the debits—by respecting and granting dignity to each new community. The county's tolerance and welcoming ethos cultivated a "go-along, get along way of life" which enabled newcomers to grasp opportunities which enriched the community in turn. In this way, the lessons of Columbia Pike are universal.

In one of the *Living Diversity's* many interviews, Cairo-born Dahlia Constantine exclaims, "This neighborhood is diversity nutso… Different blocks have different ethnic mixes." In contrast to diversity in California, she continues, "here there are many layers of diversity." Urban communities that are as inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable as the UN aspires to nurture are going to be those which adapt to the unevenness of deeply layered and complex urban life. As *Living Diversity* elegantly illustrates, there is no better way to begin that journey than with a walk down Columbia Pike.

October 7, 2015

Endnote

1   Lloyd Wolf, Paula Endo, Duy Tran, Xang Ho and Aleksandra Lagkueva, *Living Diversity: The Columbia Pike Documentary* (Arlington, VA: Columbia Pike Project, 2015).

Washington's Rose Park and the Lessons of Welcoming Public Space

Rose Park, Washington, D.C.
Photo courtesy of MJWein/Flickr

Nestled between Washington, D.C.'s lovely eighteenth century village of Georgetown and the ravine forming Rock Creek Park, Rose Park winds its way along a foot-and-bike path running between M and P Streets NW. Early mornings are given over to joggers and dog walkers; mid-afternoons to families; and later on, baseball and tennis players join with shoppers at a popular weekly greenmarket. Some of the city's most competitive street basketball games assume center stage pretty much any time in a basketball-mad town.

Rose Park is a gem; a pause in the hectic cityscape that would make any community proud. This bucolic patch is everything an urban park can be; a healing interval in an overly competitive town.

Rose Park is noteworthy not only for what is, but for what was. The Park was set aside following World War I by the Ancient Order of the Sons and Daughters of Moses for the recreation of African American children.Both Georgetown and West End neighborhood across the Rock Creek were historic, dating from before the Civil War. Predominantly African American communities, they were joined in the early twentieth century by the original P Street Bridge. Concerned that the area's overcrowded streets and alleyways were no place to play, the society's elders raised the money to knit together a park

for their community's children. Known variously as Patterson's Park, Jacobs Park, and Winships Lot, these community grounds eventually fell under control of the D.C. Department of Recreation, which undertook major renovations just before the outbreak of World War II.

The park and its community thrived. Nearby Mt. Zion Church and other churches banded together to organize summer camps and Boy Scout troops, while the Rose Park Warriors played other amateur baseball teams across the city. Tennis stars Margaret and Matilda Roumania Peters, who lived around the corner at 2710 O Street, learned their skills at the local courts, as did many a standout basketball player.

Washington was a Jim Crow town at the time and the presence of white and black children playing together offended municipal authorities. Beginning in the 1940s, whites began to move into Georgetown in a very early example of the process of private revitalization now known as "gentrification." In desperation, around 1945, the D.C. Recreation Department started posting signs warning that the park was "For Coloreds Only." This move was widely protested by black and white community members alike, forcing authorities to accept Rose Park as the first integrated recreational area in the District of Columbia.

In 1947, freshman Congressman John F. Kennedy joined the gentrifiers, as did several of his family members and friends. A few years later, he proposed to Jacqueline Bouvier in a booth at Georgetown's Martin's Tavern and settled

Black social clubs held activities at the Monticello House on the right. Georgetown, Washington, D.C. Photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Washington, DC

into an impressive Federal-style row house at 3307 N Street, NW to start a family. Both daughter Caroline and son John, Jr. were born in that house before the family moved to the White House in 1961. For young mother Jacqueline and daughter Caroline, Rose Park was their playground. African American Washingtonians of a certain age fondly remember playing with Caroline as Jacqueline looked on.

Jacqueline was already familiar with Black Washington, having studied photography as a young reporter with master African American photographer Robert Scurlock at his famous studio on U Street in the heart of the city's Black community. At Rose Park, she is remembered as having mixed with her African American neighbors with ease.

Rose Park hardly was a biracial paradise. More often than not, Blacks and Whites were alone together as they enjoyed the playground, rarely crossing over the color boundary in any meaningful way. The area nonetheless was unique among the city's recreational facilities for embracing all comers regardless of their race. It provided a model of what the city and country could become.

In all probability, very few of those enjoying the park today know this history. African Americans were pushed out by planning and zoning regulations intentionally designed to drive them away. Over time, the park became the playground for the neighborhood's new residents who were whiter and wealthier than those who came before. They benefit from the foresight and civic vision of the elders of the Ancient Order of the Sons and Daughters of Moses. Rose Park, in this regard, is an example of how urban space can evolve over time, enriched by its own past and those who created it.

May 27, 2016

Feasts for Eyes Too Blind to See: Destroying Communities in the Name of Ideology

The end – as Nomvuyo Ngcelwane would recall decades later in her memoirs *Sala Kahle District Six: An African Woman's Perspective*[1] – proved to be unremarkable. One early October day in 1963, an ungainly truck rumbled up to 22 Cross Street in Cape Town's District Six, in the heart of one of the most diverse neighborhoods on the African continent. A team of brutish movers descended upon a modest but much-loved abode, climbed thirteen narrow steps to a second-floor flat, gathered up the Ngcelwane family's earthly belongings, and quickly dispatched them miles away to the distant "black" township of Nyanga West. Mr. Ngcelwane was off at his job with the United Tobacco Company in Observatory at the time, so his wife and children took their new keys and went off to start an unwanted alien life.

The Ngcelwanes were members of a community that was being written out of history. They were Africans living in an historic part of Cape Town known as District Six. Because it was more often thought of as a "coloured" area, District Six stood as an affront to the racial dogmatists who had designed South Africa's apartheid policies. The guardians of racial purity—empowered by the passage of the Group Areas Act in 1950—systematically set out to obliterate everything associated with the area so that its convenient real estate could become part of a freshly cleansed, white central city.

The Ngcelwanes—a working-class family of Xhosan cultural heritage from the amaBhele clan, adhering to the Protestant Christian Methodist faith that had come to town decades before—were forced to move from a neighborhood that had been home to a community of perhaps as many as 60,000 souls that included Afrikaner-speaking descendants of East African slaves, Afrikaner- and English-speaking former Dutch and British working-class colonists, Muslim merchants, shopkeepers whose ancestors had arrived in Cape Town as Dutch chattel, Jewish immigrants fleeing Russian pogroms at the beginning of the twentieth

District Six Museum, Cape Town
Photo courtesy of Jasmine Nears

century, Christian missionaries and their flocks, and residents of every conceivable complexion. Individual and group identities formed around jobs, clan, ethnicity, language, religious belief, gender, and birth generation. The last pre-apartheid census in 1946 officially identified 28,377 District Six residents, including 20,184 "coloureds," 1,096 "Asians," 5,957 "Europeans," and 840 "natives."[2] Holiday traditions were shared, distinct cuisines enriched one another, and a pulsating blend of musical cultures took shape.

Such a mélange of humanity could only offend those who preoccupied themselves with defining and enforcing concise racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and linguistic boundaries. When they had the power to do so, the proprietors of racial "purity" dispatched the Ngcelwanes and their neighbors to "scientifically" organized "monoracial" settlements remote from the city itself. Such official deportations—as opposed to less formalized, market- and custom-based segregation—first occurred in Cape Town with the removal of Africans from District Six in 1901 following a bubonic plague epidemic. Resettlement gained ferocious regularity once Afrikaner nationalists, led by Daniel François Malan's National Party, gained control of the country's Parliament in 1948.

District Six was hardly the only "mixed" South African urban neighborhood to disappear under the separation policies of the Nationalists' apartheid regime. The newly empowered authorities likewise eradicated Johannesburg's Sophiatown and Fordsburg, Port Elizabeth's South End, East London's North End, and other, smaller integrated areas. In fact, District Six managed to hold on a bit longer than some similar neighborhoods, thanks in part to the stubborn resistance of Cape Town's City Council and other local leaders. Overall, between 1913 and 1983, at least 3.9 million people were forcibly removed from their homes in South Africa to enforce what the ideologues of state policy defined as "racial purity."[3]

District Six had been among the most diverse and vibrant of Cape Town's in-town neighborhoods for decades, a creation of the days when the former Dutch provisioning station had become, in the eyes of the city's Victorian and mid-twentieth-century boosters, a "tavern of the seas." District residents provided basic services to their neighbors, labored on the docks, and worked in the warehouses and workshops that were a quick walk downhill in town.

Many residents of District Six were the descendants of slaves known locally as "Malays," who had been brought by the Dutch in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from their South Asian colonies. Their Afrikaans speech, Arabic education, shared occupations, distinctive sartorial, culinary, and medical practices, music and festivals, and one- and two-storied flat-roofed whitewashed houses bespoke

a cosmopolitanism that seemingly distinguished the area from anyplace else in the Cape Colony.

This neighborhood was precisely the sort of place that outsiders look upon with scorn. The area appeared to be in a constant state of decrepitude, because its poor residents and landlords lacked the capital needed to upgrade their residences. The district seemed to overflow with the sort of hucksters who feed off the poor, offering up an endless variety of entertainment to be enjoyed by sailors (and by those socially proper sorts who wanted to pursue their sporting life beyond the scrutiny of family, friends, colleagues, and coreligionists). Criminals were thought to lurk in various shadows, looking for easy prey.

Yet, District Six was always far more. Musicians fused Dutch wedding and folk songs, melodic revels sung at picnics (the ghommaliedjie), and lively comedic songs (the Afrikaans moppie) with American minstrel music as well as British brass band traditions. New Year's carnival groups celebrating the Kaapse Klopse, — held on Tweede Nuwe Jaar (January 2) — consistently attracted thousands of minstrels in bright garb, often carrying colorful umbrellas as they marched in blackface.

If Cape Town had become a bustling entrepôt on the central trade routes of the world's largest, wealthiest, and most powerful empire, District Six was its déclassé roadhouse, close enough to the main road to be visited and far

Land claimants at a "handing back District Six" rally in District Six, Cape Town
Photo courtesy of Henry Trotter/Author releases it to the public domain

enough away from prying eyes to offer any good or service that the imagination of an entrepreneur and a customer might conjure. It was the space where the human diversity of the larger city intermingled, creating more than the "exotic" "local color" that so pleased colonial voyeurs. It was, in fact, a vibrant and rich community that nurtured bountiful cultural expression and a potent social intelligence, a place where residents were able to share their everyday experiences and to live not as "coloured," "whites," "Africans," or "Indians" but as "Capetonians."

District Six was just the sort of place, in just the sort of city, where new ideas burst forth—even if no one in authority cared to take note. Mrs. Ngcelwane and her neighbors and their descendants have praised their old home over and over again, whenever and wherever they have been given an opportunity to speak. This desire found the most vivid and touching expression at the District Six Museum, which opened in December 1994 in the former Central Methodist Mission on Buttenkanrt Street. Returning residents arriving at the museum lovingly mark their former homes on a giant street map of the old neighborhood painted on the museum's floor.

About the same time that Apartheid's ideologues moved to destroy District Six, another group of overseers took aim at

a similar neighborhood a world away in Washington, D.C. In Washington, those in power feared that images of poor rural migrants from the South living in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol threatened to undermine Cold War visions of the good society. Rather than improve the lives of those enduring such conditions, Washington's power brokers acted more simply to remove them from view. By 1950, plans were well under way to displace the city's poorest residents. They began by obliterating the homes of rural African American migrants and the Jewish immigrant families who shared their lives in the city's Southwest quadrant.

The 113-block area south of the Mall and north of the Washington Channel was home to 22,539 residents in 1950, the vast majority of whom were African American. Long the arrival area for the poorest migrants to the city, the neighborhood had a dilapidated presence. Yet the social capital ran deep. Southwest D.C. was precisely the sort of down-at-the-heels urban village that can nurture poor migrants on their own terms.

In the end, the National Capital Planning Commission's reconstruction of the area destroyed the neighborhood with almost none of the residents remaining. Only a third of the area's residents were able to secure alternative housing in public projects elsewhere in the city. Approximately 2,000 families moved into

private rental units outside Southwest Washington; while others among the displaced remained completely lost from official records. A paltry 391 residents were able to purchase homes, virtually none in Southwest.

Washington's Southwest Redevelopment Project—once proclaimed by the prominent architectural critic Wolf Von Eckardt as bringing "suburban wholesomeness with urban stimulation" to downtown—destroyed the social networks that held the city together. Unlike their South Africa counterparts, Washington's planners paid little attention to where those losing their homes might end up. With few options at hand, the poor turned to relatively stable, white middle-class neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River, and to African American neighborhoods north of downtown, such as U Street. These massive disruptions combined with the lingering pathologies of segregation to push the city to the precipice of communal violence. The pent-up anger of thousands of displaced and powerless poor residents continued to build as Washington hurtled toward civic meltdown.

Resident reactions to the destruction of old Southwest Washington are suggestively reminiscent of those displaced by the destruction of Cape Town's District Six. District Sixers reported that they felt at sea in a larger world, losing trust in others and a sense of safety in the world. They felt disappointment, anger, helplessness, and bitterness.

In Washington, a quarter of the expunged residents reported five years after their relocation that they had not made a single new friend in their new neighborhoods. Only 14 percent of these former Southwest residents felt as safe in their new homes as before.

Bitter debates still rage over whether or not the Southwest Redevelopment Project removed unspeakably poor housing, and built an attractive, racially integrated neighborhood in its place or destroyed a closely knit neighborhood and removed its institutions. However lofty the planners' goals, the project's result is unequivocal as an upper middle class, biracial neighborhood replaced a densely organized, poor African American one.

Presently, Southwest is being renewed once again, re-linking streets that were divided by the previous renewal. In Cape Town, vacant fields left behind by the destruction of District Six cut a foul gash across one of the world's most beautiful cityscapes. Meanwhile, the ideological wars that animated their annihilation ended long ago.

February 10, 2016

Endnotes

1   Nomvuyo Ngcelwane, *Sala Kahle, District Six: An African Woman's Perspective* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 1998).

2   Denis-Constance Martin, *New Year in Cape Town: Past to Present* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999), p. 132.

3   Sean Field, "'I Dream of Our Old House, You See There Are Things That Can Never Go Away': Memory, Restitution, and Democracy," in *Lost Communities, Living Memories: Remembering Forced Removals in Cape Town*, ed. Sean Field (Cape Town: David Philip, 2001), p. 119.

4   Howard Gillette, Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 161-168.

Townhomes located at 6th and G Street, SW in the Southwest Waterfront neighborhood of Washington, D.C. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development headquarters is in the background.
Photo courtesy of https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/

Washington's Changing Neighborhoods: Looking East

I was approached the other day by a distinguished older gentleman as I made my way through a neighborhood metro station on my way to speak at Anacostia Senior High School. We'll call him Mr. Williams. I had just passed through the turnstiles as probably the only white person among the dozens of passengers catching trains and busses, or heading to the street. Aside from Mr. Williams, I certainly was the only passenger wearing a suit and tie.

Mr. Williams wanted to know if I had come to his distant corner of town because of the "recent incident." Washington local news was focused on a lethal armed robbery gone bad on a Metro train. Once Mr. Williams made sure I was neither a cop nor a reporter, he began to speak about the city's "last frontier East of the [Anacostia] River." What has happened elsewhere in the city was sure to obliterate his neighborhood in the years ahead, he continued.

When newcomers to Washington speak about change in their neighborhoods they discuss recently-opened coffee shops with WiFi and the trendiest new eatery. For old timers, "change" equates to crime and gentrification. For Mr. Williams, rising real estate values will mean lower crime as the bad guys will be priced out of the market. Unfortunately, so will good folk. Mr. Williams is looking forward to a safer neighborhood; he just wishes such a transformation would benefit those who already live there. At least, he hopes, change will not be permitted to obliterate the memory of all the hard working families who found a home in Anacostia over decades.

Mr. Williams – like many longtime Washingtonians – knows the pattern. Ever since the end of World War II, our city has experienced an unrelenting march eastward of gentrification and displacement beginning in the once African American neighborhood of Georgetown, and now about to leap across the last frontier of the Anacostia River. Despite decades of experience, the city has yet to find a way of improving the quality of life of longtime residents as real estate values rise. Displacement, as Mr. Williams observed, is closer to the norm.

The bitter local debate over gentrification has fallen into slogans. Cities must evolve if they are to survive, proponents proclaim. Gentrification is nothing more than deportation, respond opponents. One might think given the city's long history with this process of "private neighborhood revitalization" that local authorities might have begun to plan for displacement before it happens.

Truth be told, D.C. has had some success in retaining affordable housing (often so

discrete that no one notices). The District response to the loss of affordable housing in the face of rising real estate values, while not completely devoid of success, remains inadequate to the challenges at hand. Nearby suburban Montgomery County in Maryland – one of the wealthiest jurisdictions in the country – has enjoyed a far more accomplished affordable housing program than anything our city leaders have implemented.

The challenge, as Mr. Williams eloquently reminded me, is not just economic. Perhaps displacement is inevitable, he wanted me to know. He just wants to be sure the memory of those who were here is not lost. This is no idle concern. The profound and rapid demographic, economic, and public policy changes that have swept across D.C. in recent decades have led to equally profound conflicts over city, neighborhood, community, and individual identity.

Communities carry meaning beyond their economic function. They re-define – and are re-defined by – cultural identity and become social network hubs which provide a context for how residents think about themselves. In a city divided historically by profound conflicts over identity – black versus white, international hub versus national symbol, national capital versus hometown – skirmishes over identity are omnipresent. Identity frequently becomes attached to shifting symbols, illustrated by the case of bicycling in Washington.

Beyond the ongoing tensions that inevitably arise as cars, cyclists, and pedestrians vie for access to the same streets and sidewalks, bicycling in Washington has come to be seen by many long-term residents as evidence of a reorientation of municipal policy toward the demands of newly arriving, upwardly mobile, young professionals: the so called "millennials." A means of conveyance becomes much more: a symbol of disruptive social and cultural change. As Mr. Williams pointed out, the city started extending bike lanes east of the river last year.

The economic transformation Mr. Williams sees bounding across the Anacostia River plays out in a divided and complex city that is more vibrant, vital, and changing than tourist postcard scenes of munificent parks and public spaces might suggest. D.C. has been a city of great foreboding as long-standing social and racial conventions collapse; hundreds of thousands of newcomers inundate the region, and tens of thousands of locals move from one neighborhood to another. Mr. Williams understands what is happening all too well; which is why he wanted to be sure the unwanted interloper at his metro station – me – knew that he and his neighbors are not about to let down their guard.

March 3, 2016

From Collards to Kale: Redefining Washington's West End

Buildings in the George Washington University-Old West End Historic District of Washington, D.C. Photo courtesy of familypedia.wikia.com

I recently discovered reading a real estate advertisement that my neighborhood – D.C.'s West End – was being "redefined." I suppose that it is. Certainly development long ago "redefined" the area's historic African American community out of existence. I wonder who might be next.

A once noteworthy blue collar neighborhood, the West End had fallen into disrepair by the 1970s after having been targeted for demolition to make way for an inner beltway circling downtown. Investment and property values fell despite the area's convenient location between Dupont Circle and Georgetown. The neighborhood came on-line again once highway planners lost their battle to plough an interstate highway through the front door of the Luxembourg Embassy.

The preparation of a neighborhood renewal plan that was released in 1972 was an early signal that developers would take an interest in this tired section of town. Issued by the District's Office of Planning and Management, the plan envisioned a "new town for the West End"; which is precisely what would happen over the next several decades.

"Urban pioneers" quickly followed the cessation of highway planning. Area buildings soon filled up with the 1970s version of today's millennials. Over time, as people came and left, new residents once were undergraduate students. They were replaced by grad students. Similar transitions followed every half-decade or so as grad students were followed by professional school students, and then lawyers and World Bank economists. The story is a model of great success from the perspective of District officials, planners, and developers. This was not

always the case for those who lived in the neighborhood before.

Precise moments are readily apparent in the transition from a neighborhood of African American wage earners to one with the embassies of Qatar and Spain, a Ritz Hotel, and a Trader Joe's. For example, on one area side street mid-way through the 1970s, the first white resident moved into what had been a completely African American community for decades. The entire neighborhood came out to help him move in as is the tradition in African American Washington. When everyone was done and a neighborhood cookout ensued to celebrate, he overheard one of his new friends ironically declare, "There goes the neighborhood."

A more true prediction could not have been uttered. Within just a couple of years, poorer African American renters had been forced out by condominium conversions and rising rents. Many African American homeowners held on, aging in place. Their children and relatives had scant interest in keeping their houses once their parents, aunts and uncles had passed on. Within a decade or two not a single African American resident remained. Meanwhile, "historically accurate" brick sidewalks and street lamps have replaced towering stanchions with super-charged anti-crime lights glaring down on cracked cement sidewalks. Long abandoned fire call-boxes became art projects.

There now are precious few reminders of what the West End had been before. A post office substation marks Duke Ellington's Ward Place birthplace; the historic African-American Francis-Stevens School has become an "education campus;" the façade of an apartment building that once housed African American staff for the White House remains despite the construction of a pricy apartment building on the rest of its site; and those who know what to look for can still find the Secret Service motor pool. Otherwise, virtually nothing can be found of the historic African American West End.

Washington, D.C. has lived through almost seven decades of gentrification, beginning with Georgetown in the 1940s and continuing until today when it is reaching Brookland and beyond. Much has been gained. Washington has become a safer, more interesting, and more vibrant city. However, as the story of the West End reveals, much has been lost.

Argentine novelist Manuel Vázquez Montalbán once wrote that "triumphant cities smell of disinfectant."[1] Contemporary Washington's challenge has become how to embrace pioneers of every race, gender, creed, and generation without having them become colonizers. The city appears to fail at this challenge at least as much as it succeeds. The odor of disinfectant becomes more pronounced in Washington every day.

October 22, 2015

Endnote

1   Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *The Buenos Aires Quintet*, trans. Nick Caistor (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2003), p.3.

Small is Beautiful: A Washington Tale of Little Red Rockers and Ducks

Sometimes the smallest of interventions into the life of a city are the most appreciated. This lesson is on display once more with the addition of a dozen or so bright red rocking chairs around the Southwest Duck Pond in Washington, D.C.

The pond was once conceived as a community center for one of the most important 1960s urban renewal projects in the United States: Washington's Southwest Redevelopment Project. Neither the pond nor the surrounding community quite lived up to such billing. Once proclaimed by prominent architectural critic Wolf Von Eckardt as bringing "suburban wholesomeness with urban stimulation" to downtown Washington, the larger project in fact destroyed many of the social networks that had held the city together. The rockers – which just appeared a few weeks ago – are a small sign that, after half a century, the city and neighborhood finally are recovering from a colossal planning fiasco.

The redevelopment of Southwest was part of a more extensive slum removal and highway construction effort promoted by planners and their Congressional allies in the hopes of turning Washington into a model demonstration of how planning can solve urban problems. During the 1940s and 1950s, Congress passed a series of laws that unleashed planners to correct previous mistakes in city and regional development. Once empowered, the National Capital Planning Commission aggressively advanced a proposed inner beltway through poor African American neighborhoods adjacent to the central city.

The disastrous Southwest Freeway and accompanying urban renewal project reveal the Commission's vision for a D.C. remodeled around highways bringing suburbanites in their cars into and out of the city with hardly a poor or African American neighborhood in view. As Jerome S. Paige and Margaret M. Reuss observed, "middle and upper income citizens wanted the slums, which they saw as a reproach to their city, removed. They wanted a clean, sanitary and beautiful environment and they were beguiled by the promise of an increased tax base."[1] Their efforts to build highways and to remove slums echoed initiatives in nearly every major U.S. city at the time. Washington, however, was different. Without home rule, D.C. was presided over by a Congress that was notoriously unconcerned with the preferences of local residents.

The story is more pernicious than the dreams of misguided planners. By 1952, *Washington Post* publisher Philip Graham and well-connected wealthy white friends on the Federal City Council

had pulled together a half million dollar plan to create a new city alongside the proposed freeway. They enlisted New York construction magnate William Zeckendorf and a young unknown architect, I.M. Pei, to create a new community of apartments, office buildings, and homes from which they would profit as investors. Local residents were no match against such a powerful array of investors, media moguls, and their Congressional sponsors. Only a few skeptical voices would rise above the public relations onslaught promoting the project, as when Eleanor Roosevelt inquired about the fate of the people who once lived in the area after visiting the project in 1959.

The Southwest slums were particularly unseemly and forlorn, a degradation made more poignant by the presence of the Capitol and national monuments and museums in view.[2] The 113-block project zone south of the Mall and north of the Washington Channel was home to 22,539 residents in 1950, nearly 80 percent of whom were African American. Hundreds of buildings had no indoor plumbing; many more were obsolete and below current building code.

Dilapidated though the neighborhood was, few residents wanted to leave. Unfortunately, no one cared to contemplate the answer to Eleanor Roosevelt's query. The National Capital Planning Commission destroyed 99 percent of the buildings within the project area. As a consequence, almost none of the original residents remained. By 1972, the replacement

Washington's Southwest Duck Pond
Photo courtesy of Blair Ruble

community had half as many residents, nearly 80 percent of whom were white. They inhabited 5,900 new housing units, of which only 310 were classified as being reserved for low-to-moderate income residents. A densely organized poor African American community had become replaced by an upper middle class, biracial neighborhood. Land use patterns shifted as the population density of the new community was closer to that of inner suburbs than to the city as a whole.

This is when the ducks arrived.

The designers understood that park space represented the sort of suburban amenity their new neighborhood lacked. They set aside a three block long parcel at the corner of Sixth and I Streets SW for shared community space. By the late 1960s, planners, architects, and builders started work on a town center park on the site of what had once been Cow Alley. When it opened in 1972, the park incorporated the modernist design principles of the larger community, including gently curving walks and walls and custom-crafted wooden benches. They added an undulating concrete pond with a picturesque island waiting for migrating ducks to drop in.

None of the public spaces in the development area fared well over time as neighborhoods south of the National Mall generally fell on difficult times. Despite efforts by the National Park Service to maintain the park prior to turning it over to the city in 2007, the very design features meant to attract people drove them away.

The fountains necessary for circulating the shallow, cement constrained water often failed, leaving behind foul-smelling algae and breeding grounds for disease-carrying insects. Carefully planted trees often blocked activities in the park from view, intimidating many a passerby. Uncontrolled landscaping provided refuge to drug dealers and other miscreants. The innovative layout of islands and inlets made those who did enter feel trapped in dead ends with no escape. The Park Service gradually replaced the carefully designed furnishings with more serviceable fare. Empty more often than not, even the ducks stopped coming to the park.

By the early 2000s, the city abandoned the notion of preserving the original visionary Southwest Plan and began rebuilding the area yet again. Another "new" Southwest was more thoughtfully renewed with carefully planned in-fill projects and other urban interventions designed to draw fresh life into the area. Ironically, some of these initiatives reconnected the very streets cut off by the earlier round of "regeneration."

The Duck Pond had remained much loved by many residents despite all of these trepidations. Once firmly in control, the city government began a concerted effort to return the park to its original vision. Plants were trimmed; the pond resealed; the fountains repaired; new benches appeared. By the 2010s, the pond was a much appreciated and visited respite for residents coming and going to a new upscale grocery store nearby. Even the ducks reappeared.

One day in August 2016, red rocking chairs popped up. About a dozen or so were scattered around the benches and on the various little pods and islands, adding charm to an otherwise dismal man-made pond. They formed movable conversation pits just as the heat of high summer cranked up. People came. Some were small groupings hanging out on a gentle summer's evening; others were loners catching up on their email; still others were grocery shoppers ready for a brief respite before their trek home.

Even if the red rockers do not survive until the autumnal return of the ducks, they already are a success. The smallest of all possible interventions, their impact is huge as they lure new users into the park. Sometimes, small really is beautiful.

August 10, 2016

Endnotes

1   Jerome S. Paige and Margaret M. Reuss, *Safe, Decent, and Affordable: Citizen Struggles to Improve Housing in the District of Columbia, 1890-198*2 (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of Urban Studies, University of the District of Columbia, 1983), pp. 21-22.

2   Howard Gillette, Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 161-168.

Washington, D.C. The Anxious City

Ever since the year began, I have been speaking to groups across Washington, D.C. about how our city is changing. My 2016 tour has taken me to all four city quadrants, addressing groups as diverse as freshman at impoverished Ward 8's Anacostia High School and retired professionals brought together in wealthy Ward 3 by the Chevy Chase D.C. Historical Society. I have discovered a profound overarching commonality among all who have turned up to listen to me despite deep differences. Everyone complains that they are losing "their" Washington; and, everyone is, to some extent, correct.

Sometimes thought of as a "sleepy Southern town," Washington in reality has become a vibrant, vital, and changing urban center that has been traumatized since World War II as long-standing social and racial conventions have collapsed, hundreds of thousands of newcomers have inundated its region, and tens of thousands of locals have moved from one neighborhood to another. These shifts shatter everyone's understanding of how the city is put together and how it works. As a result, Washingtonians of all races, socio-economic standing, gender and generations find themselves looking around and seeing a city that is something different from what they thought it to be.

In speaking with residents, disorienting change is taking place along five dimensions that undermine notions of neighborhood and community: demography, economics, generational divide, the built environment, and identity. The result is a city that becomes ever more anxious about its own future.

Demographic Change: Washington's population is growing with newly arriving primarily white young professionals replacing older blue collar African Americans. Traditionally white neighborhoods in north and west parts of the city simultaneously are becoming home to larger numbers of visible minorities – though more often Hispanic and Asian rather than African American. Everyone's mental map of where one is "supposed" to be is discernibly out of date as a consequence of dramatic changes in who lives where.

Economic Change: The transformation of the metropolitan Washington economy from a government company town to a post-industrial powerhouse is evident in the evolution of the city and regional employment structure. While the number of jobs in D.C. has risen, employment in the federal sector has declined. This shift in traditional employment patterns becomes more pronounced once suburban jobs – which presently stand at

H Street corridor, Washington, D.C.
Photo courtesy of Ted Eytan/Flickr

over 3,000,000 – are brought into view. Even when supported by government contracts, newer private sector jobs fail to provide the stability of earlier civil service employment.

Economic adjustments are visible along a broad income range so that inequality continues to mark the city, becoming apparent in ever new ways. Simultaneously, long-standing racial divisions continue to plague D.C. As Georgetown University historian Maurice Jackson recently recorded, the median income for D.C. whites is $101,000; and for D.C. Blacks $39,000.[1]

Generational Divide: D.C. has become a favored destination for "Millennials" who make up the preponderance of the city's newcomers. Wedded to social media,

young whites and African Americans think of the city, and how to use it, in ways that are more similar to one another than to the patterns of their grandparents. New points of conflict emerge over zoning for coffee bars, spontaneous crowd-sourced gatherings, and noise levels in which once antagonistic middle-aged white and black Washingtonians find themselves united on the same side of the generational cultural divide.

The Built Environment: New cultural preferences, new wealth, new employment patterns, and new leisure patterns exert pressure on a built environment of a different era. Developers replace their sturdy 1970 cement office building facades with snappy glass; new owners of traditional 1920s townhouses add two or three more stories on top of the

old; once open parks are reorganized as fenced-in dog walks; basketball courts give way to bike paths. Not only are the people walking city streets now unfamiliar; the streets themselves look increasingly different.

Identity Change: These profound and rapid demographic, economic, generational, and physical alterations sweeping across D.C. have led to equally profound conflicts over city, neighborhood, community, and individual identity. H Street, Columbia Heights, the Southwest Waterfront, Anacostia, U Street, Mount Pleasant and many, many more D.C. neighborhoods have experienced significant identity dislocation within a broader sweep of "gentrification." The present era is perceived across the city as one of unbridled development and displacement.

As a long-time Washingtonian, I am struck by how each of these challenges would have seemed welcome in the depths of the 1970s and 1980s, a time when

multitudinous obituaries were written for our city. From the perspective of those years, Washington now enjoys all sorts of problems that would have been inconceivable.

As the familiar erodes, residents across D.C. are becoming ever more anxious. Among a school group in Southeast, or a preservation organization in Northwest, a shared lament appears to be taking hold in Washington: Everyone feels disoriented as a new city emerges around them.

Having had the opportunity to speak recently with so many different Washingtonians, I am reminded that no urban reality is immutable. Anxious though they may be, my D.C. neighbors throughout the city remain deeply committed to making their communities work. Living in – let alone governing – cities requires a constant recalibration of how everyone sees the world. That has always been part of the fun.

March 28, 2016

Endnote

1 Maurice Jackson, *The Health of the African American Community in the District of Columbia: Disparities and Recommendations*, prepared for the D.C. Commission on African American Affairs (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 2016).

10 Steps to a More Genuine D.C. Experience

Originally published by *The Washington Post,* August 15, 2016

Every year, around Labor Day, recent college graduates descend on the District in hopes of finding a job. I am writing to offer them some advice about how to adapt to their new home.

Dear New Washingtonians:

Welcome to Washington, an exciting city full of opportunity, yet one that is frequently misunderstood. As you settle in, please try to expand your horizons beyond politics and building your résumés. This is your chance to discover a city full of people pursuing their dreams.

Admittedly, discovering the real Washington can be difficult and you will encounter far too many people who never have. You can spot them by their litany of grievances, including perhaps the most tiresome trope: "No one is from Washington."

Actually, tens of thousands of people are from the greater D.C. area and many have families that have lived in the District for generations. These native Washingtonians most often are African Americans – the snide observers on the absence of hometown residents are frequently white. Those who think no one is from here may be confirming certain aspects of American race relations rather than illuminating any peculiarity of the nation's capital.

Others lament that Washington is not a "real" place – like back home in New York City or Iowa. Well, yes, Washington is like itself more than it is like either New York or Iowa or anywhere else – but it is real.

To step outside the stereotypes, here are 10 paths to a more genuine D.C. experience.

1. Volunteer for a community-based organization. Find a church, a school or a neighborhood club, and you will meet many people living "real" lives.

2. Shop at a local market where farmers sell their produce. Seek out the small neighborhood markets scattered across the metropolitan area on any day of the week – for instance, the Bethesda Farm Women's Market.

3. Seek out performing-arts venues and focus on the dozens of locally run and managed theaters, music series and faith-based venues featuring local talent. World-class performers in music, dance, theater and more live and work in Washington, and they are often more accessible here than they are in New York and Los Angeles. What's more, you easily could find yourself seated next to a member of Congress at Southwest Washington's Westminster Church on Blue Mondays.

4. Visit a different museum every week and seek out the many small art and history museums around the D.C. region. The

Kreeger Museum, Phillips Collection and Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens are among the best of their kind and retain the feeling of entering someone's grand home (which reflects how each of these private collections came together).

5. Head to a library. Every jurisdiction in the D.C. area has vibrant library facilities while one of the most impressive libraries in the world – the Library of Congress – is situated in the heart of the District. Not surprisingly, Washington has been home to many of the country's leading authors, as is revealed on the fascinating D.C. Writers' Homes website.

6. Engage in Washington sports. True, the professional teams can be maddeningly frustrating to follow, but amateur and community sports opportunities abound. If you think you've got game, try out your hoop skills in a game of pickup at the legendary Rose Park court in Georgetown.

7. Ride the bus. Metrobuses are the workhorses of local transportation, and they'll take you all over the city and beyond.

8. Find a locally owned restaurant. Ethnic restaurants and tiny neighborhood eateries abound here. In the 1980s, the truism seemed to hold that Washington diners benefited from lost revolutions abroad as excellent Ethiopian, Vietnamese, Salvadoran and Afghan restaurants

opened up. By the 2010s, cuisines from all over the world had proliferated in the region. For some of the best Uzbek food anywhere, for example, check out Rus-Uz, a restaurant in Arlington's Ballston area.

9. Explore beyond the Capital Beltway. Visit a small town on the Eastern Shore such as Chestertown, Md., less than an hour from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Or, go for a hike in the Blue Ridge Mountains; better yet, visit one of the many Civil War battlefields within 100 miles or so of the Beltway. Head from Hagerstown, Md., to historic and natural touring opportunities ranging from Antietam National Battlefield to the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park.

10. When in doubt, make an excursion to Baltimore. Washington's neighbor is nothing if not real. Visit Lexington Market, one of the oldest continually operating markets in the United States. A more down-home scene is difficult to imagine than Lexington Market on a Saturday afternoon.

Discovering a Washington beyond politics requires effort, but it's worth it and will make your life here far more agreeable.

Welcome!

August 15, 2016

Mobility, Community, and Equality

A Public Management Train Wreck: The Lessons of Unaccountability and the Washington Metro

I didn't ride the Washington Metro the day it opened in March 1976. I waited for the crowds to abate before I shuttled back and forth in the Red Line between Farragut North and Union Station for the first time.

I did ride the Blue Line on its opening day in July 1977, and was off-loaded due to a "disabled train" for the first of too many times to count. The engineers, it seems, had scrimped on the specifications for the metal used supporting the car floor. Not anticipating high ridership, they chose flooring that bent under the weight of a crowded train. This malleability, in turn, prevented the car doors from closing. Little did I realize just how much this failure was a precursor of things to come.

Meanwhile, I eagerly awaited each new line as the original 101 mile system map filled in with bright solid colors. The Metro was transforming Washington, making it feel more and more like the cities that had shaped my life before – New York, Toronto, Moscow and Leningrad. Within a couple of decades, the Washington Metro had garnered the second largest ridership of any transit system in the country. With each new line, politicians would gather,

smile, and cut a ribbon proud of the expanding Metro empire. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, they ruthlessly slashed maintenance budgets. Among their early choices, the custodians of the public trust operating Metro decided to shut down its internal escalator repair service in favor of contractors. Within a few months, broken escalators would become an iconic symbol of the increasingly dysfunctional system.

As the lines opened, Metro began purchasing new cars. Sometimes, someone got the design and inspection wrong and cars would break down with unknown frequency. Other times, the procurement process dragged on for years. At all times, disabled cars delayed increasingly frustrated passengers with growing regularity. The signs of decay, malfeasance, and mismanagement became increasingly unavoidable as the system crumpled in open view. Farce turned to tragedy as passengers began to die in accidents that should have been avoidable.

Robert McCartney and Paul Duggan recently published a slashing exposé of

ineptitude on the front page of *The Washington Post*, "Metro at 40: A Mess of its own making."[1] "'America's subway'," they write, "which opened in 1976 to great acclaim – promoted as a marvel of modern transit technology and design – has been reduced to an embarrassment, scorned and ridiculed from station platforms to the halls of Congress." After reviewing thousands of pages of reports issued over the past half-century – amazingly issued even before the system began operations – the writers reveal that Metro's problems began from the very beginning.

With a jerry-built governance structure and an absence of a secure funding source, amplified by a culture mocking transparency and accountability, Metro could well have been programmed for failure from the outset. Incredibly inept managerial decisions nonetheless accelerated decline.

Believing that technology would solve problems beyond its own design capabilities, managers and employees simply became lazy; relying on machines to send off alarm bells rather than trusting their own eyes and ears. Politicians poured money into new lines while short-changing the sort of routine maintenance that is required to keep trains running, escalators climbing, and lightbulbs burning.

Unbelievably, those in charge couldn't spend the money they had. From 2001 to 2015, McCartney and Duggan report, Metro spent only $3.7 billion of the $5.1

billion budgeted. Gross safety violations are still uncovered even after the federal government sent in teams of inspectors. Fundamentally, individuals at every level of the Metro system act as if they are completely unaccountable for their actions.

Meanwhile, expert commissions, consultants, and ponderous reports identified with mind-dumbing regularity the same failures. With callous disregard for the public, far too many Metro managers and employees stumbled on in a no-fault world punctuated by fear among those who knew that they would be punished for speaking up. Those with responsibility for the system sat by, failing to respond as every Metro ride held out the unfortunate promise of becoming an unexpected adventure.

Back in the 1990s, I sat through more than anyone's fair share of lectures by American "experts" admonishing Russian and Ukrainian public officials on the dangers of inadequate information sharing, scanty public consultation, and unaccountability in public management. My Russian and Ukrainian colleagues frequently concluded that the visiting Americans were preaching sermons that they themselves did not observe.

Local Russian and Ukrainian officials came to loathe American advice even as they acknowledged the merit of the actual proposed measures. "How can you Americans constantly tell others what to do when for you it is all just a game?" one Russian city council member once asked me.

I now know what my response should have been; I should have recommended that all those American experts and consultants return home and do all that they could to clean up our own house. If only they had perhaps Russian-American relations would have improved, and Ukrainian public officials might listen more to our sermons about the evils of corruption. Perhaps I might have been able to rely on an on-time trip home with regularity.

But this didn't happen. When it comes to Washington Metro, the transparency and accountability that sustain efficient and effective public services won't just come about without more than a push. After McCartney and Duggan's article, we all know that every tough question that has needed to be raised has been asked on numerous occasions. Until and unless those with custodianship take full responsibility for their actions – has anyone in management or in line operations, for example, ever been disciplined for past accidents leading to passenger fatalities? – the Washington Metro isn't going to even begin to improve.

April 26, 2016

Endnote

1   Robert McCartney and Paul Duggan, "Metro at 40: A Mess of Its Own Making," *The Washington Post*, (2016).

A runaway train crashed into another at the Woodley Park station. Only minor injuries resulted, as the runaway was empty and everyone fled the standing train.
Photo courtesy of futureatlas.com

CARPETing the City with Transit: Essential Elements for Promoting Mobility and Equity with Sustainable Development[1]

Originally published as a Meeting of the Minds blog, posted May 10, 2016, and presented at the World Smart City Forum, Singapore, July 13, 2016.

In September 2015, the United Nations approved 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) intended to shape the global effort to end extreme poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change. Among the 17 goals, one is devoted to the urban condition that is shared by more than half of humanity. Goal 11 calls for action to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

Achieving the SDGs would be difficult under any circumstance; no less so given that the present is an era of growing inequality. Nowhere are exclusion and inequality more apparent than in cities where extreme wealth and poverty coexist side-by-side. Promoting shared prosperity requires opening up channels for greater mobility of all kinds, including social and economic; but most especially physical. To escape from cycles of poverty and injustice, residents need to be able to move around the city.

What would mobility look like in an inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable city? Some might consider Copenhagen a model: a city designed to promote cycling as the quickest and easiest means for getting around. Traffic lanes are segregated to separate bicycles from cars and pedestrians, cycle tracks are prioritized in service plans so that snow removal takes place on bicycle lanes before car roadways, and traffic lights are adjusted to favor cyclists' speed. According to some estimates, around two-thirds of all Copenhageners ride bikes. If Copenhagen defines success, than nearly every other city will come to be seen as a failure no matter how much investment is made in multimodal transit options, support of bicycling, and other, perhaps

Metrocable Medellín, En dirección a Estación San Javier
Photo courtesy of Álvaro Ramírez/Flickr

small, interventions to maximize mobility.

Another place to look for innovation is to the US Department of Transportation, which recently launched a Smart City Challenge for mid-sized American cities. According to challenge guidelines, success includes using advanced technologies to "help citizens address safety, mobility, and access to opportunity, sustainability, clean energy, economic vitality, and climate change."

In thinking about the goal of promoting inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities, perhaps there are more meaningful criteria to consider. The simplest test would be to consider whether or not mothers would want their children to grow up in a given community. Meeting that standard depends on ensuring foundations for opportunity and security. Do transportation and mobility have any role in achieving such urban success?

On the one hand, developing and introducing new transportation systems is an engineering problem. But engineers are neither social workers nor politicians. Since large transportation projects are among the most expensive that communities undertake – and have consequences which last several generations – their economic and social value need to be taken into consideration as well. The contours of new transportation projects will shape economic development, social geography, and environmental resilience for decades.

While it is relatively easy to build efficient transport systems which carry the well off

from their homes to employment centers, responding to social need through mobility is more complex. The following guidelines help to frame the challenge more clearly. Together, they represent a CARPET of transportation options that envelope the cityscape:

CONTEXT matters. In considering new transportation projects, planners need to have a solid grasp on existing conditions including present transport, employment, and housing patterns. This analysis is already standard. What may be a little unusual is that thought needs to be given to political context over time. In situations involving multiple jurisdictions, for example, long-term funding and administrative support must be secured at the outset.

To point to a negative example, the political agreement bringing together several jurisdictions of various sizes and legal status to build the Washington, D.C. metro system did not include provision for permanent secure funding streams. With a jerry-built governance structure and an absence of a secure funding source, the Washington Metro could well have been programmed for failure from the outset. Inept managerial decisions accelerated decline so that a once state-of-the-art system now languishes under neglect and an absence of accountability and transparency as no single authority can be held responsible for the system's dysfunctions.

On a more positive note we see how in France, employers are taxed for local transportation authorities, providing a

reliable funding source. Therefore, funding is secure and with it, accountability mechanisms. Without this structural context in mind we would have difficulty understanding how the Washington and Parisian transit systems achieve such disparate results.

ASK questions. Potential users of any new system – especially the most disadvantaged among them – often know more than experts think they know about how a system must function. There often are differences between actual ridership patterns, projected future transport systems, and real demand. Listen to what is being said to be sure that new systems go where people actually want to go.

In 2004, the Colombian city of Medellin, created a gondola transit system to serve particularly disadvantaged communities. It is the world's first modern urban aerial cable car transport system, constructed as part of neighborhood upgrading projects, all of which were designed with active input from community members. The system has improved residents' quality of life, decreased violence in the neighborhood, and addressed spatial inequality as well as reducing emissions and maintaining sustainable mobility.

Meanwhile, planners in Rio de Janeiro moved forward building a similar system, in part based on the Medellin experience. The Teleferico, as it is called, has been controversial from the very beginning. While the system has benefitted some residents – such as elderly and people with disabilities – in the communities have protested that the system is hardly a substitute for the provision of basic services such as sanitation, health, and education. Homes and public spaces have been removed for construction of stations. The system has failed to meet expectations not because of any technological flaw, but because planners and officials did not consider the broader social context.

RIGHT SIZE plans. Transportation projects, if they are to be sustained over time, need to conform to the financial and administrative capacities of communities. There is little to be gained by building a cutting-edge system in communities that neither have the funds nor the management capacity to support the system over the long haul. Bankrupting local government undermines potential gains from new systems; while requiring external skilled personnel to operate a system similarly diminishes chances for long-term sustainability.

Oftentimes, building a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system is more manageable and cost effective than rail-based systems, for example. The world's first BRT in Curitiba has been copied around the world ever since. BRT addresses congestion by designated lanes for buses, consolidating bus stops to reduce their number along a route, and by single payment systems. A BRT can cost up to 50 times less than rail, and it doesn't take decades for construction.

However, a BRT system is not a sole solution to all transit issues as it may provide insufficient capacity to meet demand. BRT might be an optimal solution in some instances while not in others. Systems must fit with capacity and circumstance to right size a project.

PROTECTED space. Transit systems need to provide citizen security, with adequate resources being provided over the long haul to make them safe and resilient. Public transportation systems such as LA County Metropolitan Transportation Authority and Charlotte Area Transit System have launched safety apps that allow riders to call the police or report a problem quickly and easily, allowing for two-way communication. Riders can submit a photo or video, and choose to report a problem anonymously.

Meanwhile, in all too many cities women, and especially the poor, rely more on public transportation than men and have concerns about personal safety affecting the way they travel. Space is only protected when everyone feels safe.

ENGAGE riders. Reaching out to communities on an on-going basis is important for success. To do so, transit authorities much nurture persistent and long-term relationships with their ridership throughout the lifetime of a system rather than single consultation sessions during the planning process. Rider unions, meaningful public meetings, constant monitoring of ridership patterns and

consumer complaints will advance the capacity of management to operate more efficiently going forward.

For example, the Straphangers Campaign within the New York Interest Research Group, has played a leading role over several decades for building a consensus for new investments by engaging riders to rate bus services and rail lines. The straphangers regularly publish rankings of New York's twenty subway lines and periodically hold other contests such as reports on the 10 best and worst transit events of the year.

By contrast, planners and managers of mass transit in Miami failed to respond to the demand of potential riders for more, better located bus stops as well as for a rail transit connection to the airport (an oversight that took a quarter-of-a-century to alleviate). Public transit trips continue to consume much more time than automobiles despite some of the worst traffic congestion in the hemisphere. Important feedback mechanisms that could have led to improved service remain inadequate for the task of continuously informing decision-making.

TRACTABILITY in the face of change. Adaptability to new realities moving forward is important in sustaining mobility in an urban system. Transportation projects are designed to operate for decades during which time any number of political, economic, social, and technological changes will take place.

Systems should be designed to respond to those changes.

The Paris Metro started out as a classic urban system operating within the administrative boundaries of the city. As Paris expanded beyond city limits, planners began thinking in regional terms. The RER-Reseau Express Regional is operated jointly by Paris Metro operator RATP and national rail operator SNCF. It connects Paris and suburbs; running underground like metro in Paris, functioning outside the city as a ground-level commuter rail, and operating with a single fare structure.

The Toronto subway system was constantly ranked among the best in North America a half-century ago. Lacking the political will to initiate the construction of new lines, authorities relied increasingly on a system that failed to serve growing numbers of the metropolitan region's residents, degrading service on what once had been a gold standard for transit systems.

Collectively, the sensibilities reflected by a CARPET for transportation policies – CONTEXT, ASK, RIGHT SIZE, PROTECTED, ENGAGE, TRACTABILITY – create the milieu in which transportation policies can promote the inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities embedded in UN Sustainable Development Goal number 11. Together, they help insure that mobility can be maximized to address inequality and marginalization.

May 10, 2016

Endnote

1   The author would like to thank Wilson Center intern Marina Kurokawa for her assistance in the preparation of these remarks.

Metro, Paris
Photo courtesy of katsuhiro7110/Flickr

Returning to Plato's Cave: How the Light of Smart Technology Brings Us Back to Old Debates

Originally published as a Meeting of the Minds blog, posted July 18, 2016

Dozens of the world's leading specialists and practitioners making cities around the world "smarter" gathered recently in Singapore to discuss how information technology can assist cities manage energy, water, security, and transportation challenges. The World Smart City Forum, organized by the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) in partnership with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), took place just as cities across the globe are utilizing all manner of innovations to collect knowledge and deploy resources to advance public safety, economic efficiency, and public service.

As expected, much of the discussion revolved around advances enhancing municipal management; the opportunities presented by Big Data for improving urban administration; and, the challenges of securing the avalanche of increasingly vast information about urban residents. The information revolution has arrived in town, speakers suggested, and has done so with a vengeance. City authorities are continuously adopting new data and tools for understanding and responding to what is taking place on city streets. For every new opportunity there appear to be sobering new challenges.

One common theme shared by speakers from several continents and professions emphasized that Smart Cities begin with smart leaders and citizens. New information technologies, they argued, are not ends in themselves. The present is a period when new opportunities of unprecedented analytical power become available; but to what purpose? The assembly broadly agreed that smart technologies must promote holistic problem-solving in the service of citizens. Participants repeated this message be they engineers or elected officials, from cities in societies thought of as authoritarian and from societies known for democratic engagement. All agreed on the transformative potential within the act of making a city smart.

As technology gathers ever more information, city management is challenged to expand accountability and enhance service provision. More than ever, cities hold out the promise of greater citizen engagement and expanded access to opportunity across urban boundaries. Precisely because this is the case, Younus al Nasser, Assistant Director General of the Smart Dubai Office, argued, the primary objective of urban governance becomes people's happiness.

At a time when some engineers seem motivated primarily to innovate for the sake of innovation; industry leaders gathered at the World Smart City Forum accentuated the responsibility of inventors

and implementers to accept technological advancement as an enabler rather than as goal. This perspective drives discussions of the contemporary city toward an agenda as old as the Ancient Greek concern for public virtue: what is the good life?

The message from Singapore makes strikingly apparent that each new opportunity holds fresh challenges within. To succeed at optimizing the impact of technology, engineering is not enough. Philosophical reflection and debate on the nature of public purpose and public virtue is as pressing today as it has been across centuries. Smart Cities, like all urban space, remain very much rooted in time, place, and culture. The challenge is universal; the response is particular.

Beneath the streets of Singapore just as the Forum came to an end, three young giggling girls scampered onto the local metro (MRT) dressed in their school uniforms holding iPhones in their hands. As they settled in, they personified everything that had been said during profound deliberation at the Forum. They gossiped and giggled charmingly about the day's events in multiple shared languages as they passed messages on their phones back and forth, probably enthralled like the rest of the world with the latest game craze. They were three smart, self-assured, citizens of the world in the making, living in a city that has become one of the "smartest" in the world (the train they were riding is driverless, for example). These girls have grown up in a world unimagined by their parents. Their future is bright; if the smart technology revolution enables them to reach their human potential. For all the change in the world, as the participants in this year's World Smart City Forum emphasized over and over, the challenges of being human remain the same. And the answers to what it means to lead a virtuous and happy life are as diverse as they always have been.

July 18, 2016

Marina Bay, Singapore
Photo courtesy of Leonid Iaitskyi/Flickr

Summer of Washington's Capital Discontent: Lessons from the Past

Captiol building with scaffolding, Washington D.C. Photo courtesy of Shutterstock

This has been a summer of discontent in Washington best symbolized by the region's collapsing metro. In addition to large sections of the system being shut down for too-long deferred maintenance, one major station – Cleveland Park – was recently flooded following an intense but hardly rare outbreak of thunderstorms. National politics, the city's biggest industry, has become a dystopia of theorists' nightmares; and even in local politics, three of Mayor Bowser's stalwart allies on the city council went down to ignominious defeat in party primaries. Even the iconic Capitol Dome is under scaffolding during much needed repairs.

What is going on? There are many explanations, of course, but one is simply that Washington has become a city. Cities constitute humankind's largest and most complex products and, like all human inventions, are given to failure over time. Washington, as a planned city, more often than not is thought of as a symbol rather than a place; and certainly is talked about in American national discourse as such. Yet, at some point, Washington like all planned cities eventually just became a place.

Washington is a special kind of city, the planned new capital. Vadim Rossman, in a superb encyclopedic new book – *Capital Cities: Varieties and Patterns of Development and Relocation* – chronicling the history of planned capitals (they are everywhere having been built ever since

politicians needed a place to be) argues that new capitals are only as successful as the political regimes which build them.[1] Moreover, at a certain point the new becomes the old; and capitals become just cities. Washington is now past that point.

There is, of course, no fixed moment when a new capital becomes a city. In some instances, such as St. Petersburg and Washington, the process required a couple of centuries. Why so long? Because there needs to be sufficient lived life to take abstract places set down in plans detached from any local reality to take hold. Perhaps there is a need for all memory of the founding moment to have been lost to living memory, requiring the grandparents of city dwellers to have become familiar with the capital as a place and not a plan. More important, it requires that all sorts of institutions take hold which would sustain a city even was the capital to leave.

St. Petersburg is a case in point. The Bolsheviks moved their capital to Moscow almost a century ago and St. Petersburg remains the fourth largest city in Europe. The Soviets still needed the educational, cultural, and, most importantly, industrial enterprises that had emerged in St. Petersburg even after its "true" function as a seat of power had come to an end.

Despite all the commentary suggesting that Washington is "broken" and the country would be better off without it, Washington would not disappear were the capital to move to, say, St. Louis. This was not the case in the nineteenth century when such proposals gained traction for a while. However, at a minimum, the region's half-dozen major research universities and many more additional smaller colleges would remain. It simply would be too expensive to leave. Like St. Petersburg's industry, much of its economic power would remain, though certainly in muted form.

Washington may be an unhappy town at the moment, but hardly more or less so than many other cities around the world. Cities created as Washington was – out of whole cloth – are human inventions just as their more organic cousins, port cities and market towns, are. At some point, cities just stop being new. Perceptions, however, always lag.

Naples, Italy, is so old that few remember that its name came from the Greek for "New Town." Founded as a Greek colony, Naples was the sort of colonial new town that we think of as being somehow more pure and rational. Yet, "the wonder of the place," as the novelist and writer on the arts Benjamin Taylor reminds us in *Naples Declared: A Walk Around the Bay,* "is that

it has not been annihilated by so much history. Ask yourself what New York or Chicago or Los Angeles will be twenty-five centuries from now. Imagination falters."[2]

Looking at images of water streaming into Washington metro stations during this summer of discontent, the imagination indeed falters in thinking what the city would be like twenty-five centuries from now. Meanwhile, Washingtonians are reaching for the pails to bail themselves out.

June 22, 2016

Endnotes

1   Vadim Rossman, *Capital Cities: Varieties and Patterns of Development and Relocation* (Routlege: 2016).

2   Benjamin Taylor, *Naples Declared: A Walk Around the Bay* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2012), p. 5.

Naples, Italy
Photo courtesy of Shutterstock

The Arts and
Community Making

Feel that Funky Beat. The Sound of Converting Dreams of Community into Reality

Saturday, May 2, 2015 dawned beautifully in Washington, D.C.; warm but not hot, breezes gentle not strong, skies azure blue not cloudy or gray. The dozens of businesses, artists and neighborhood groups behind the city's Second Annual Funk Parade could not have asked for a more perfect day for their celebration of community in D.C. An estimated 50,000 Washingtonians agreed, seizing on the opportunity to enjoy local musicians and each other's company.

Washingtonians of all ages, sizes, shapes, colors, genders – both native and newcomer – descended on U Street NW, the venerable main street for African American Washington, to catch musicians ranging from school kids to veteran celebrities strut their stuff on eight performance areas throughout the neighborhood. When cocktail hour arrived, hundreds – including Mayor Muriel E. Bowser – gathered in front of the historic Howard Theater to fall in behind the Batala D.C. all-female drumming ensemble, the Eastern High School marching band, skateboarders, and an impromptu platoon of children in robot costumes, and paraded their way to the iconic corner of 14th and U Streets.

As afternoon turned into evening, the magic of community embrace encompassed the heart of Washington, a city perhaps better known for division, tension, and distrust. Meanwhile, a couple dozen miles up I-95, neighboring Baltimore struggled to find calm following an ugly outburst of civic unrest in the wake of the death of Freddie Gray while under police custody a few days before.

The Funk Parade did not just happen. The celebration is the product of determined community organizing and collaboration among local businesses, clubs, arts and neighborhood organizations in and around Washington's U Street and the surrounding Shaw neighborhood. The proud center of African American Washington during decades of Jim Crow racial segregation, the area entered into a long period of decline starting in the 1950s.

In April 1968, civic unrest following the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. devastated the area. Over the course of three days of destruction followed by nearly two weeks of military intervention, the city suffered

twelve deaths, 7,600 arrests, more than 1,000 fires, loss of nearly 700 destroyed businesses leading to the permanent loss of 5,000 jobs and the destruction of nearly 700 apartments and homes. Much of the carnage – estimated to cost the city and its residents over $27 million – occurred along and around U Street. By the time the metro system expanded into the area in 1991, the streets around U Street had become among the poorest and most crime-ridden in the city.[1]

With the opening of several metro stations in May 1991, the U Street area began to attract new investment and residents, leading to dramatic changes throughout the neighborhood. Over time, this once proud center of African American culture in Washington was no longer predominantly African American. If, in 1990, residents in the census tracts surrounding U Street were 77% African American, they were just 22% African American two decades later. In light of the startling earnings gap between D.C. African Americans and whites (the median income of the city's black residents is between a quarter and a third that of whites), this extreme makeover exacerbated long festering tensions.

The vision of Funk Parade came in a dream to U Street resident Justin Rood, a D.C. native who had observed the growing tension in his neighborhood with concern. With local music advocate Chris Naoum, the two reached out to neighbors, local business and civic leaders to collaboratively produce an event in which all Washingtonians could create together a celebration of "the spirit of funk," U Street, and the city of D.C.

Funk turned out to be a remarkable vehicle for bringing Washingtonians together. It's hard not to dance and feel good when you hear it: the genre is intensely rhythmic, mixing elements of soul, jazz, rhythm and blues surrounding a powerful electric bass grove that came together in African American communities during the 1960s. With its deep musical history and strong Black culture, Washington emerged as a major center for Funk, eventually producing its own distinctive sound originated by local music legend Chuck Brown that became known as "Go Go."

The First Annual D.C. Funk Parade on May 3, 2014 attracted an estimated 25,000 participants. With a city administration more concerned about traffic control than community amity, the procession was forced to march from the historic Howard Theater through small streets ending in an alley behind the Lincoln Theater and Ben's Chili Bowl several blocks away. A year later, a new mayor relented to allow marchers to move along U Street, recognizing that the event already had become a D.C. tradition.

The Funk Parade and the positive shared emotions it engenders did not happen by chance. They are the result of the hard work of community residents, business owners, civic and religious leaders, and politicians to create a moment encouraging everyone in the city to transcend the travails of daily life in a long divided city. "The Funk parade – free

your mind and your city will follow," read the original flyer which Rood and Naoum distributed to organize local businesses and community groups behind the event. By strengthening shared community identity, the Funk Parade promotes the deep social capital that expands community resilience.

Community, like a parade, is a process, not an object; a verb, not a noun. Uneasy relations still mark Washington's sharp urban edges as the city grows and changes. Tensions run deep among old-timers and newcomers, between African Americans, African immigrants, Latinos, Asians, and whites, and between rich and poor. Parading together, dancing to the

same rhythm, making music on a pleasant spring afternoon cannot heal decades of conflict. Sustained work is required, which helps to explain why Rood has quit his job and is forming All One City, an organization which will use public art and collaboration to build resilience in D.C. and beyond.

But a parade on a lovely afternoon can begin to create bonds between neighbors through music and a shared love of place. Such connections are a key ingredient in making city culture sustainable through upheaval and change. In the words of Parliament Funkadelic's George Clinton, "Everybody's got a little light under the sun."

Endnote

1   The D.C. History Curriculum Project, *City of Magnificent Intentions: A History of the District of Columbia* (1985), p. 498.

2nd U STREET FUNK PARADE Assembly on T at 7th Street, NW, Washington DC on Saturday afternoon, 2 May 2015
Photo courtesy of Elvert Barnes Photography

Hometown D.C.: America's Secret Music City

In his memoir *Music Is My Mistress*, Duke Ellington fondly recalled whiling away the days of his youth at Holliday's poolroom in Washington, D.C.. Holliday's, Ellington wrote, "was not a normal, neighborhood-type poolroom. It was the high spot of billiard parlors… Guys from all walks of life seemed to converge there: school kids over and under sixteen; college students and graduates, some starting out in law and medicine and science; and lots of Pullman porters and dining-car waiters."[1] But for Ellington, far more important was the fact that the best piano players in town hung out at Holliday's as well.

There was a time when D.C. was full of such places where folks from all walks of life came together with the city's best musicians effortlessly and unceremoniously. Oftentimes, the musicians were not "local" in that they played around the world. For every Duke Ellington, Marvin Gaye, and Roberta Flack who left town to make it, there was a Shirley Horn, Buck Hill, Bo Diddley, Keter Betts, Chuck Brown, and Charlie Byrd who remained in D.C. even as they toured the planet. Hometown D.C. has long been – and continues to be – a music city.

Like the Neapolitan "music machine" of the eighteenth century, Washington's musical environment has formed around large institutions – schools, churches, colleges and universities, the Smithsonian, the Kennedy Center, and the U.S. military – rather than around a star system. For musicians, institutions provide steady incomes and medical insurance. Large – and, at times, overly bureaucratic – institutions rarely provide opportunity for celebrity.

As a result, Washington's music community gets overlooked even as dozens of Washington-reared jazz lions make their mark in New York, Washington-based musicians such as Afro-Bop Alliance and Shirley Horn win Grammy awards, and Washington bands such as the legendary Fugazi define entire musical genres. On any given evening of the year, Washington musicians are performing on a half-dozen continents.

 Music abounds. The Washington area's more than 2,000 professional musicians, their non-professional colleagues, students, friends, families, and audiences sustain important Blues, Gospel, Jazz, R&B, Go Go, Bluegrass, Gallic, and Classical music communities overflowing with talented masters. Many local performers move among several of these genres freely.

Northeast Washington's Jazz and Culture Society
Photo courtesy of Blair Ruble

Public institutions – unlike the recording and film industries or the musical theatre – rarely have separate stage entrances for performers. Musicians and audiences arrive through the same door and share the same space so that distance and boundaries shrink. Jazz Diva Sharón Clark may be a superstar when she performs in Russia's St. Petersburg Philharmonic Hall; in Washington, she is just a neighbor when she holds forth at Alexandria's La Porta's Restaurant.

For the past two decades, Washington has been filling up with newcomers competing for space and driving up rents. The sorts of micro-environments which nurtured a young Ellington, sustained a successful Shirley Horn, and trained current jazz newcomers Kush Abadey and Ben Williams are disappearing. Or so it only appears. Reality is more complex.

Just this year, an important new venue has opened which brings together musicians and the community just as Holliday's Pool Hall did back in Ellington's day. Founded by Dr. Alice Jamison and DeAndrey Howard, a venerable trumpet player and beloved figure, the D.C. Jazz and Cultural Society (JACS) prides itself on creating a community-oriented space for players and listeners.

Located in a storefront hidden away in an obscure corner of the Brookland neighborhood, JACS is just the sort of place Ellington found so important: an

informal and comfortable venue featuring top-flight talent that is always open to all. Performances run from six until nine every Wednesday and Sunday evening (times when musicians usually do not have gigs lined up). Entry is five dollars, and food is available at cost. The room includes a stage large enough to hold a piano, an organ, and perhaps a half-dozen players. On a good night, others join in from the floor.

Jamison and Howard have found the right spot for their venture. Located near the intersection of Franklin and 12th Streets NE, JACS is just far enough away from any metro station to have avoided quickly rising rents. Yet, one of the metropolitan area's best Neapolitan pizza places – Menomale – is no more than a football field away.

Gentrification is taking place here as everywhere in D.C. with a luxury apartment building rising across the street. Covered by colorfully painted street murals honoring jazz greats, JACS helps insure that the area will long look and feel like Hometown D.C.

In her classic works on Washington history, Pulitzer Prize winning author Constance McLaughlin Green described African American D.C. as a "secret city,"[2] known to itself but hidden from others. This dichotomy between hometown and official, secret and known, runs through the city's history, politics, and identity. Washington is one of America's compelling music cities. Like Green's "secret city," D.C. remains absent from far too many narratives about American music.

Hardly hidden from those who want to know, gems that enrich the lives of music lovers thrive in the city's various nooks and crannies from a concert hall in the National Academy of Sciences along the National Mall, to a parlor of an old Victorian mansion on O Street NW, from a church in Southwest D.C. and a former Naval Hospital in Southeast, to the corner of Franklin and 11th Streets in Northeast. Thanks to Washingtonians such as Jamison and Howard, the city's music makers – playing as diverse genres as Blues and Bluegrass, Jazz and Go Go – insure that D.C. retains a community heart.

November 16, 2015

Endnotes

1   Duke Ellington and Mercer Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), pp. 14-17.

2   Constance McLaughlin Green, *Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Down By the Riverside: Jazz Over the Volga

The quiet Russian provincial city of Yaroslavl would hardly appear to be a hotbed of jazz. Located around 160 miles north east of Moscow on the Volga River, the city retains a charming historic center shaped by Catherine the Great's planners in the eighteenth century, and embellished by the region's wealthy merchants in the nineteenth. Founded in 1010 by Prince Yaroslav the Wise on the site of the prince's legendary wrestling match with a bear, the city thrived as a center of trade and religion throughout the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. Shattered by Russia's Time of Troubles (1598-1613), the settlement regained its lost dynamism following the establishment of the Romanov Dynasty in 1613.

Not surprisingly given the town's wealth, Yaroslavl, throughout its history, supported a distinctive school of iconography, educational establishments, and literary culture, as well as Russia's first theater. In many ways, the city and the estates spread across its surrounding region provided, before the Bolshevik Revolution, an ideal setting for a Chekov drama.

Yaroslavl grew rapidly during the Stalin-era industrialization drive of the 1930s, and continued to expand into a major industrial city throughout the Soviet period. Prior to World War I, Yaroslavl had been home to about 114,000 residents. That number increased more than fivefold during the Soviet era, reaching more than 600,000 by the end of the twentieth century. Industries and residential districts grew up in concentric circles around one of Russia's best preserved historic cityscapes (which was among the very few largely spared by the ravages of World War II). As a result, the Yaroslavl historic cityscape retained a sense of self-contained solidity anchored by several striking sixteenth and seventeenth century cathedrals and monasteries as well as late imperial provincial administrative buildings.

More recently, Yaroslavl has been Russia's hockey town, with the local professional team winning several Russian championships during the 1990s and 2000s. The connection between the sport and the city has become more passionate following a plane accident at the local airport on September 7, 2011 when the entire Lokomotiv team was killed as they were heading to their first match of a new season.

Throughout its long history Yaroslavl has proven to be close enough to Moscow to remain within its cultural and economic gravitational field; yet far enough away to retain and protect a modest degree of independent thought. Local notables include numerous innovators across the ages such as Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, poets Nikolay Nekrasov and Mikhail Kuzmin, Russian

Jazz Center. Yaroslavl
Photo courtesy of Vladimir Fedotov/Flickr

theater pioneer Fyodor Volkov, rock critic Artemy Troitsky, Oscar-winning animator Aleksandr Petrov, musician Alex Sipiagin, and Gorbachev-era political reformer Alexander Yakovlev. Their stories often led such achievers far from the protective embrace of their provincial childhoods even as their youths shaped opportunities to see the world on their own terms.

One such local hero – Igor Gavrilov – chose to remain close to home. Like many of his generation, Gavrilov grew up in a Soviet Union that was neither open nor completely closed. The outside world could enter through shortwave broadcasts and tape cassettes as well as visiting performers on various cultural exchange programs. Won over to jazz by broadcasts on the Voice of America by the legendary announcer Willis Conover, Gavrilov found jazz wherever he could.

Unlike the immediate postwar periods when saxophones were declared illegal and subject to state confiscation, jazz had grudgingly won a degree of respectability by the time Gavrilov was growing up. The genre even had entered the curriculum at various conservatories around the country. Jazz nonetheless remained sufficiently daring to be of interest to slightly mutinous youth, such as the young Gavrilov.

Joining together with other university students and graduates of his generation – in Gavrilov's case at the Yaroslavl State Pedagogical Institute – he began

organizing jazz concerts which, like the music, teetered on the edge of propriety. In March 1974, he established his first jazz club. Later, in 1979, he launched what has become Russia's oldest jazz festival, Jazz Over the Volga, which immediately attracted world-class performers from around the Soviet Union and abroad. The newfound openness of post-Soviet Russia enabled Gavrilov to become ever more ambitious – especially as the local economy recovered from its collapse at the time of the fall of the Soviet Union.

The Yaroslavl Jazz Center continued to evolve and, in 1999, secured an elegantly modest historic building in the attractive center of Yaroslavl's lovingly restored downtown. Gavrilov continued to recruit top-flight performers from Moscow, St. Petersburg, New York, and Berlin to take the stage in the Center's invitingly small hall which seats several dozen listeners at a time. Visiting performers join with the staff in teaching jazz to local youth.

Beyond education Gavrilov, a natural historian, collected the Russian Jazz Archives. This venture has entered into partnerships with the Library of Congress and other major repositories to secure and protect Russia's jazz legacy. Visitors such as the Library of Congress's Larry Applebaum, the Senior Music Reference Specialist in its Music Division, have helped Gavrilov build his archive into an international facility.

Gavrilov has created a community asset which has kept both jazz and social connections alive through the various vicissitudes of his city's and country's post-Soviet transition. On any given night, Yaroslavtsy of all generations and social groups gather to hear such performers as Guntar Baby Sommer, Gunda Gottschalk, Aleksei Kruglov, among many. Visiting artists stay on to teach after their performances.

The Center's audiences come together for a good time, of course. They also gather for the comfort of friends and the strength of community. Igor Gavrilov has, over the course of his career, nurtured all that is jazz at its best in a most unlikely setting.

January 19, 2016

How Naples Became Europe's Great Musical Machine

Ulysses, if Homer is to be believed, was the first mariner to escape the temptations of the Bay of Naples. According to *The Odyssey*, Ulysses had heard of the bay's infamous sirens — part women, part bird or nymph-like creatures — that lured sailors to their death by singing so beautifully that no one could sail on without succumbing. Thus, when returning from the Trojan War via the bay, Ulysses plugged the ears of his crew with beeswax and bound himself to the mast until they had sailed safely out of range of the sirens' audible temptation. Angry over their failure to seduce their prey, one of the sirens, Parthenope, drowned herself in the sea. The original settlement on the bay was said to have grown on the spot where she washed ashore, claiming her name as its own (the area is now part of the city of Naples, Italy).

Various communities huddled around the Bay of Naples date, in one incarnation or another, back to the second millennium before the birth of Christ. Ever since, this urban area has remained one of the world's great cultural fulcrums. The bay's environment is so perfect that local residents have rarely been forced to be enterprising; they simply lived off the land and sea in the mild Mediterranean climate, as safe harbor, turquoise sky, and indigo sea sustained lush vegetation boosted by a deep layer rich volcanic soil and an easy growing season.

Yet all was not quite idyllic. The inhabitants of this earthly paradise faced the constant possibility of near-instantaneous annihilation by Mount Vesuvius. Categorized as a "red" volcano for the lava that periodically spews from its crater, Vesuvius has erupted cataclysmically over the centuries, an ever-present reminder of the transitory folly of human existence.

This combination of natural appeal and peril has nourished a lively culture marked from the time of its original settlers, the Epicureans, by a distinctive blend of sensuous, joyful hedonism and rigorous, stern sanctity — of paganism and piety. Thus, Naples has been home both to the inventors of pizza and chocolate ice cream, on the one hand; and to countless religious orders, on the other.

This fusion of heaven and hell — of so-called high and low cultures — stands at the center of the Neapolitan creative impulse. Since its founding, Naples has been a city of sudden and disconcerting juxtaposition of opposites, the sort of place that creates and recreates over and over again the kind of delirious urbanism that constantly bursts forth with invention and creativity.

This creative impulse has been visible in many forms, not the least of which is music. As sage Neapolitan observer Barringer Fifield has suggested, Naples is a city that was founded, after all, on a song.

Music's hold over the city has remained omnipresent throughout its history. This was never truer than during the seventeenth century, when Naples remained under its Spanish viceroys and became the music capital of Europe.

Viceregal Naples was dominated by an endless number of religious institutions — churches, chapels, monasteries, convents, hospitals, orphanages, schools — connected to various orders within the Roman Catholic Church. These oases of calm and magnificence contrasted with the chaos of the streets outside their high, protective walls.

Many of these establishments required choral and instrumental music to celebrate God's glory. As a result, baroque-era Naples consumed musicians of talent. The musicologist Dinko Fabris argued that the hiring of musicians rested more on merit than in other European cities because the Spanish viceroys remained for more-or-less fixed terms. Consequently, permanent patterns of patronage associated with a dominant family could not be sustained as the preferences of successive viceroys changed over time. A hierarchy of privilege and power evolved, often becoming linked to the changing status of the religious institutions at which a musician worked.

Musicians in Naples, as elsewhere, were artisanal employees of their patrons. The local love of the theatrical, music, and dance greatly impressed visitors from the North. The seventeenth-century English diarist John Evelyn recorded that the city's "women are generally well-featured but excessively libidinous. The country people [are] so jovial and addicted to music that the very husbandmen almost universally play on the guitar, singing and composing songs in praise of their sweethearts, and will commonly go to the field with their fiddle."[1]

Communal musical forms were immediately incorporated into the increasingly popular performance art of opera, as librettists drew on such stock

comedic characters as nurses, pages, magicians, and allegorical figures in their works. However, the Neapolitan environment — like that of Venice — was dominated by institutions rather than by wealthy families. This system created a stable demand for musical talent, with employers hiring outsiders as well as musicians from socially unacceptable groups who demonstrated talent. Some of the most important contributors to Neapolitan opera, such as the Sicilian-born Alessandro Scarlatti (who moved to the city from Rome) came from elsewhere because they could compete more or less fairly to earn appointment in a relatively open system. Others were products of the city's remarkable conservatories, which, with the exception of Venice, were unmatched.

According to some estimates, there were seven conservatories and 617 religious institutions (including 248 churches) in mid-seventeenth-century Naples, offering musical education to 368 boys in 1660, a number that later increased. The four most-prominent conservatories — the I Poveri di Gesù Cristo (founded in 1589), Sant'Onofrio a Capuana (1578), Pietà dei Turchini (1583), and Santa Maria di Loreto (1537) — fell under civic and viceregal control.[2] Once again, Venice was Naples' primary competitor, with several vibrant conservatories of its own. However, Venetian musical education was concentrated at orphanages for girls, whereas Neapolitan conservatories catered to boys. This meant that, upon reaching adulthood, the graduates of the

Neapolitan conservatories were more likely to pursue professional careers in music.

Orphanages sponsored conservatories in order to provide their boys with a livelihood. As in the famous orphanages for girls in Venice, some parentless children were the illegitimate offspring of the wealthy and notable. Poor families often attempted to send their sons to the conservatories because they provided free room and board. Some conservatories recruited from particular regions around the kingdom — Apulia provided the most students — while others specialized musically.

Boys who had been castrated were of particular value given the popularity of virtuoso castrated vocalists — the *castrati* — who were thought to supercharge female vocal ranges with male lung capacity. Perhaps the most famous, Carlo Maria Broschi (known by his stage name, Farinelli), followed precisely this path from Apulia to Naples on to trans-European eighteenth-century rock star status.

Some of the best musicians in the city earned their living by teaching at the conservatories. The opera master Francesco Provenzale, for one, taught at two of the four conservatories during a 40-year career. At its height, this system produced a stream of innovative musicians who transformed the musical landscape of the era, including, among many, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, Francesco Provenzale, as well as Alessandro and Domenico Scarlati.[3]

Many graduates of Neapolitan conservatories had significant eighteenth-century professional careers as performers and composers across Europe. They came from a variety of backgrounds, and rose through recruitment and educational networks that reached from the top to the bottom of Neapolitan society. The city's musicians formed what became known as the Neapolitan School, whose members were avidly sought by impresarios and aristocrats from Paris to Saint Petersburg, from Madrid to Vienna to London.

Such energy could not last forever, however. Over the course of the eighteenth century, political and economic crises eviscerated the Neapolitan institutions' capacity to employ musicians. Faculty members remained in place too long to allow replenishment of their ranks from below, so dozens of highly sought-after conservatory graduates spread across the face of Europe. Nonetheless, by the early nineteenth century the Neapolitan music community was still renowned for its technical virtuosity.

As the music world's center of gravity moved to Paris, Naples and the Neapolitan music machine would be "reformed." In 1806, Joachim Murat, appointed to the Neapolitan throne by his brother-in-law, Napoleon Bonaparte, consolidated the conservatories into a single school as part of a general rationalization and reform of local artistic institutions. This school, the San Pietro a Majella, inherited the remarkable music libraries and manuscript collections of its predecessors and continues to train musicians today.

Though Neapolitan music became embedded in these larger Italian and European trends, it retained a considerable degree of distinctiveness and reputational excellence. Across the 28 centuries of its existence, Naples reveals the wisdom of the urbanist Rem Koolhaas, who famously argued in *Delirious New York*, his evocation of New York during the 1970s, that "the Metropolis strives to reach a mythical point where the world is completely fabricated by man, so that it absolutely coincides with his desires."[4] Since its founding, Naples has been such a city of sudden and disconcerting juxtaposition of opposites — the sort of place that creates anew the kind of delirious urbanism that bursts forth with invention and creativity. It has done so, singing and playing music all the while.

December 2, 2015

Endnotes

1   Manfred Pfister, *The Fatal Gift of Beauty: The Italies of British Travellers: An Annotated Anthology*, Vol. 15 (Rodopi, 1996), p. 381.

2   Louise Stein, review of *Music in Seventeenths-Century Naples: Francesco Provenzale* (1624-1704) by Dinki Fabris (2007), *Journal of Seventeenths-century Music*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (2015).

3   Noel O'Regan, review of *Music in Seventeenths-Century Naples: Francesco Provenzale* (1624-1704) by Dinki Fabris (2007), *Music and Letters*, Vol. 89, No. 4, (2008), pp. 610-612.

4   Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York, NY: The Monacelli Press LLC, 2014).

Building Community Through Theater; Lessons from the Setagaya Theater

Nomura Mansai is among Japan's most famous performers, starring in popular *Kyogen theater.* He also is the artistic director at Setagaya Public Theatre, one of Japan's most extraordinary theatrical institutions. His rendition of *Macbeth* adapted to the Noh and Kyogen traditions has won rave reviews around the world.

Terumasa Hino is among Japan's top jazz musicians, a master on the trumpet, cornet, and flugelhorn. Hino became a staple on the vibrant New York jazz, fusion, and downtown loft scenes during the 1980s and has remained based in New York. He returns frequently to Tokyo where he still towers over the Japanese jazz world.

Nomura and Hino can be anywhere in the world. Their fame and talent open doors everywhere. Yet, their creative energies draw them to a non-descript commercial complex in suburban Tokyo where they devote their natural gifts to working with Japan's most successful community theater, the Setagaya Public Theatre. Nomura arrived at this theater in 2002 to direct and oversee the company's entire program; Hino started his highly successful Jazz for Kids program in 2005.

Setagaya is one among two-dozen administrative wards that make up Tokyo in a manner similar to the boroughs that constitute London. The area would not seem very "suburban" to most Americans. Home to around 900,000 residents, it is the largest among Tokyo's wards in population and second largest in the amount of territory it occupies. Setagaya's population density is about twice that of New York City. Americans will discover Setagaya soon as it will become the site of

Setagaya Public Theater
Photo courtesy of Nemo's great uncle/Flickr

the American pre-Olympic Games training camp in 2020.

Founded in 1997 at the initiative of the ward administration, the Setagaya Public Theatre could well have languished underused and disconnected from its own community as happens in hundreds of towns and districts around Japan which once overinvested in now unwanted buildings. Setagaya proved different. Long home to large numbers of visual artists and writers, the ward even created an autonomous literary museum to celebrate its own cultural successes. The goal was to keep a living culture and arts central to local life.

The theater's artistic team set out to promote modern dance and contemporary theater by bringing the community to the stage. The theater houses two halls holding audiences of 600 and 200 that are used almost every day. Outreach programs extend to the disabled and infirmed, to children and the elderly, and the merely interested. Each year, the staff and producers create a play based on the stories told by local residents.

This is where Nomura and Hino enter. For Nomura, as artistic director of the entire company, the theater is a place to experiment; for Hino, the Jazz for Kids program is where he not only seeks out the next generation of Japanese jazz masters but also aims at developing children's zest for living. At some point during their school career, each of the ward's 6,000 schoolchildren will appreciate the theater's Kyogen performance. Moreover, Hino hosts four-month jazz workshops for children (some of whom have never played an instrument before) which end with an annual Kids Big Band Concert.

The homespun flavor of so much of the theatre's activities does not diminish artistic accomplishment. Setagaya Public Theatre's mainstage has seen productions of grand creative achievement such as Nomura's uniquely Japanese *Macbeth*.

The theater estimates that between 80 and 90 percent of its audience arrives from outside the ward, including from abroad. In addition, somewhere around a third of ward residents have attended a performance. Setagaya Public Theatre unquestionably remains a community asset. Its extensive outreach programs and community spirit carry unlimited meaning for everyone in the ward.

When asked what makes Setagaya special, residents frequently credit their neighbor Nomura Mansai and his role as artistic director, and Terumasa Hino's Jazz for Kids, for some of the most creative theatrical performances in Japan today. The community basks in a special spotlight every time a performer – young or old, beginner or famous – steps out on stage merging master and novice into a shared enterprise.

December 28, 2015

The Cirque Comes to Town. Learning about Culture and Cities from Montreal

Riding the Washington Metro one morning I entered a car completely transmogrified into a rolling advertisement for the most recent production of the international entertainment conglomerate Cirque du Soliel. Washington seems to be surrounded by Cirque du Soleil these days. As the ceiling of my metro car proclaimed, *Kurios* opens later this month under a big tent at suburban Tysons Corner, Virginia. Meanwhile, a constant barrage of email notices have informed me that I wasn't quick enough to catch *Toruk*, which just closed in nearby Baltimore; or *Amaluna*, which ran at National Harbor in suburban Maryland last year. As nearly everywhere these days, it seems, Washington area audiences can't get enough of the nouvelle cirque from Montreal.

The Cirque du Soleil story is about far more than acrobatics under a large tent. Indeed, it highlights how particular urban micro-climates unleash powerful chemical reactions of creativity and place. Cirque du Soleil probably would never have taken shape anywhere other than in Quebec of the 1980s.

Two street performers – a juggler and a fire eater – applied for a provincial grant in 1984 to take their little troop *Les Echassiers* (The Waders) on a summer tour of Quebec to celebrate the 450th anniversary of Jacques Cartier's voyage to Canada. Guy Lailberté and Gilles St-Croix founded their company in tiny Baie Saint

Paul a few years before, and survived by winning a Canada Council for the Arts award in 1983.

With a new government grant in their pockets, they hired Guy Caron from the recently established École nationale de cirque de Montréal and consolidated their group under the title *Les Grand Tour du Cirque du Soleil*. Their small assembly would grow into the largest and most successful among Quebec's nouveaux cirques, constantly responding to the rapidly changing political and cultural environment surrounding its origins. Within two decades, their troupe became the largest entertainment company in the world, earning 85 percent of its peak revenues in 2012 from the United States (largely from eight permanent productions in Las Vegas), while spending 85 percent of its operating budget in Quebec. The initial public investment by Quebec taxpayers has paid off enormous dividends for Quebec and Montreal.

Montreal – with its vibrant tradition of street culture; absence of established circus ensembles; strong related cultural sectors such as dance, theatre, music; and willingness to invest public funds into the arts – shaped what Cirque du Soleil could and would become. As a band of street performers working in a durable local tradition, there was no place for animals to wander around as they moved through the province. Laiberté, who had supported

Le Rêve, Cirque du Soleil - Las Vegas '10
Photo courtesy of dRphotographie/Flickr

a trip to Europe by performing as a folk musician and busker before becoming a fire eater, understood the power of music for driving a performance forward as did many popular Québécois musicians of the period. Quebec's fractured linguistic atlas encouraged the performers to develop their own distinctive language of gibberish.

Caron, meanwhile, brought Franco Dragone on board. Dragone, from Belgium, was well trained in *commedia dell'arte* performance which aligned with the company's emerging artistic sensibilities. More generally, the company's approach fit into an incipient Montreal brand of circus performance that blended French *nouveau cirque*, Soviet acrobatics, and American entrepreneurship.

Lailberté and St-Croix returned from their initial tour of Quebec with empty bank accounts and reapplied for Canadian and Quebec support. The Province's grantmakers and cultural bureaucrats remained skeptical of their success. In the end, the duo secured an all-important funding renewal upon the direct intervention of Quebec Premier René Lévesque, whose Parti Québécois government was busily promoting separation from Canada. The new money allowed the crew to take their show on the road outside Quebec for the first time.

While traveling around Canada, Lailberté and St-Croix caught the attention of the organizers of the Los Angeles Arts Festival, who invited them to perform at their 1987 showcase. By this time Lailberté and St-Croix managed to convince Mouvement des caisses Desjardins (Dejardins Group Credit Union) to cover more than $200,000 in bounced checks. They decided to give Los Angeles a try. California audiences fell in love with the company, as did executives from Columbia Pictures, which offered to finance a grand North American tour. Cirque du Soleil would open a permanent outpost in Las Vegas three years later.

The support of American funders enabled Cirque du Soleil to continue to grow by leaps and bounds as they established a major presence in many entertainment centers around the globe. At the same time, the company never lost its attachment to its birthplace in Quebec. The corporation put down deep roots in Montreal, building a massive headquarters and training center in the underprivileged immigrant portal neighborhood of St. Michel. Their investment established Montreal as a major focal point of the global circus world, luring top performers and ambitious amateurs alike. Their base has remained firmly rooted in Montreal,

Cirque du Soleil
Photo courtesy of Michael Anthony Saddul/Flickr

even after the company was bought out by Chinese and American financiers.

Cirque du Soliel's influence on Montreal in return extends beyond mere presence. As home to so much circus talent, Montreal spawned a vibrant extended circus community including gifted offshoots such as Les 7 doigts de la main (7 Fingers), Cirque Éloze, and Cirque Alfonse. These alternative companies are not mere imitations of Cirque du Soleil. The internationally successfully Les 7 doigts de la main, for example, has maintained a distinctive aesthetic featuring more human-scale performance styles. Les 7 doigts de la main also has worked closely with physical theater groups such as Gilles Maheu's Carbone 14 and Robert Lepage's groundbreaking Ex Machina, dance companies such as Édouard Lock's La La La Human Steps as well as with musical groups such as Richard Ste-Marie's La Fanfafonie.

The growth of Cirque du Soleil has been exceptional; even more so as it transpired at a time when the circus industry seemingly had entered a period of decline. Simultaneously, its success is a product of a larger trajectory within the Quebec performing arts community. In August 1948, a group of artists influenced by the French surrealists began to discuss the future of the arts in Quebec, publishing a manifesto proclaiming the "untamed need for liberation," "resplendent anarchy," and extoling the creative force of the subconscious. Mimeographed in four hundred copies, their platform sold for a dollar a piece at a local Montreal bookstore. The impact of their proclamation *Le Refus Global (Total Refusal)* proved enduring as commentators around Canada and abroad picked up their ideas for a "modern" Quebec culture.

The only dancer in the group, Françoise Sullivan, would become one of Canada's best known abstract painters and sculptors as well as founder of a distinct tradition in modern dance. Four decades later, looking back on her career, Sullivan noted, "art can only flourish if it grows from problems which concern the age, and is always pushed in the direction of the unknown. Hence, the marvelous in it."[1] Cirque du Soleil has taken that Montreal sensibility to the world.

July 5, 2016

Endnote

1   Françoise Sullivan, "Dance and Hope" in *Refus Global: The Complete 1948 Manifesto of the Montreal Automatists,* trans. Ray Ellenwood, 101-16 (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1998).

Bringing New York to the Broadway Stage

Hamilton, The Musical, starring Lin Manuel Miranda
Photo courtesy of Steve Jurvetson/flickr

In 1987, two very different reviews of the state of New York City appeared almost simultaneously. The first was a report issued by an ad hoc Commission on New York in 2000 chaired by Robert F. Wagner Jr., who was the son of the city's beloved three-term mayor and grandson of a popular New York Senator, and was himself deeply involved in city affairs and a chair of the City Planning Commission. The second review was a special issue of the distinguished leftist journal *Dissent* edited by author and journalist Jim Sleeper. Although both reviews presented a portrait of what was recognizably the same city, their differences in orientation

and interest pointed them in opposite directions. The titles of their work reflect their divergent sensibilities: Wagner's report captured *New York Ascendant*,[1] while Sleeper's journal issue was framed *In Search of New York*.[2]

Both reports appeared at a turning point in the city's destiny. The economic disinvestment that was beginning to become noticeable by the end of the 1950s cascaded throughout the 1960s and 1970s; the manufacturing sector collapsed; port facilities and hundreds of critical jobs moved to New Jersey following the containerization revolution in shipping; corporate headquarters fled

to the suburbs and beyond; and even the New York Stock Exchange and NBC gave serious consideration to leaving Manhattan for New Jersey. A nadir was reached in a disastrous brush with municipal bankruptcy in 1975, widespread civil breakdown during a 1977 blackout, and excessively publicized violence on the subway and in parks. In the 1980s, a tsunami of violence accompanying a crack cocaine epidemic swept over the city, reaching its peak just as both publications appeared.

In this dire context, *Dissent's* contributors told a tale of slow and inexorable urban decline, decay, and death. New York was no longer able to create wealth for the thousands of poor citizens struggling to make their way in the city. As the city became more starkly divided by class, it became less attractive to those who had great wealth. New York was a tough, nasty place full of paranoia, racial hatred, and economic conflict in which residents felt under constant threat.

According to the ad hoc commission's report, all was not lost. The commission's members viewed the restructuring of the city's finances in response to near bankruptcy as having improved New York's ability to respond to economic change. They found the boosterism of three-term mayor Ed Koch, who held the office between 1978 and 1989, to have lifted civic identity. A New York State tourism campaign, begun in 1977 based on the song "I Love New York" similarly

started to transform how New Yorkers and others thought about both the city and its state.

More significantly, according to the commission's report, the profound changes in international financial markets, reflecting the beginnings of what we now know as globalization—including a newly assertive capitalism unleashed by the Reagan administration, and deregulation of the financial markets—enabled New York to firmly secure its position as a leading global city and world financial center. Technological changes—the opening of the Internet age—reaffirmed New York's position at the center of global communications; and the maturation of the smart economy expanded its reach beyond Silicon Valley and Boston's Route 128 corridor, establishing high-technology industries in New York. Immigration pathways to the United States during the 1960s similarly began to reshape the city as it once more became a magnet for New Americans.

This dynamism, the commission's report argued, was gaining momentum so that, by 2000, New York would be ascendant once more. The report predicted that the city would regain 300,000 jobs (matching its peak employment in 1969 of 3.8 million) and 400,000 people, growing to 7.5 million by the turn of the millennium. In fact, the city's population reached a then-all-time high of just over 8 million in the year 2000. This growth was largely driven by immigrants. According to some

estimates, more than 3 million immigrants made their way to New York over the past half century, many remaining in the city.

Despite privileging different factors, both *Dissent's* and the commission's reviews identified many similar positive and negative trends. Both accounts lamented the absence of civility in New York life, edginess that both saw as counterproductive for the city and its residents. These hard edges would continue to mar civic life throughout the twentieth century, softening only in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Thereafter, many New Yorkers subsumed whatever differences they had under the shared experience of living in a city under assault.

For the authors of the commission's *New York Ascendant*, positive developments were offset by growing income disparities, continued high rates of crime and violence, and a floundering educational system that poorly served both the city's youth and employers. In spite of their pessimistic outlook, the contributors to *Dissent* recognized New York was experiencing a remarkable mixing of different traditions—especially of Hispanic and African cultures—which produced unprecedented creativity on city streets. Both reviews emphasized the importance of the arts, with Dissent highlighting the creativity bubbling up from below and *New York Ascendant* identifying culture as a draw making the city attractive to what we now call the "creative class."

In retrospect, the commission was closer to the mark, in that New York once more emerged as one of the world's preeminent cities. Longtime New Yorkers are not quite confident of this success, seeing what has been described as the "homogenization"—and even the "Disneyfication" or hypergentrification—of their city, while those without abundant means are forced to leave town. Whether this perception is accurate for the city as a whole, there is no doubt that Times Square has been Disneyfied—by Disney itself.

The fate of Times Square – and of the Broadway theater world so central to it – captures the contradictions of the past half-century. In a premature death notice for the Broadway theater, science fiction master Thomas Disch sardonically noted in a 1991 edition of the *Atlantic*, that bulldozers were gathering to attack the squalor of Times Square by leveling many of the blocks around 42nd Street to replace low life with high-rise towers. This is, in fact, what transpired as mayors Rudy Giuliani (1994–2001) and Michael Bloomberg (2002–13) promoted the conversion of Times Square into a tourist and corporate wonderland embodying broader transformations throughout the city. The Times Square Alliance, established in 1992, lured major corporations to the area and promoted attractions—such as giant LED screens and live television broadcasts—that would create a nonthreatening urban vibe. Bloomberg closed the square to most automobile traffic in 2009, securing the

area's place as a major tourist destination.

Broadway and its theatrical scene have flourished as a tourist attraction, with the number of productions and audiences growing once again. By the 2014–15 season, Broadway was setting new records for the number and value of tickets sold, drawing more than 13 million people paying $1.3 billion. Broadway has become so successful that there is now a shortage of theaters rather than a shortage of productions. Shows are queuing up to find a Broadway venue.

Disch and many others, however, are more concerned about artistic worth than financial profits. From this perspective, shows that are dependent on high-tech

wizardry and lushly mounted revivals often do not deserve accolades.

Serious theater has not died, either in New York or in the United States but it has moved, shifting to Off and Off-Off Broadway in New York, and to regional theaters around the country. Broadway benefits from these networks. Shows from Washington, Chicago, and Seattle make their way to Broadway and enrich the New York scene, even as Broadway shows go on tour. There has been a maturation of American theater, in which Broadway is a part of a larger live entertainment industry, with outposts in cities such as Austin, Las Vegas, and Nashville.

Enduring art forms continually prompt cries of despair over their impending death. For instance, just as some began

New York City street art
Photo courtesy of Nick Normal/flickr

to write off Broadway as nothing more than light diversion for tourists, Lin-Manuel Miranda came along.

Miranda is a product of the exciting blend of Hispanic and Black cultures celebrated by the authors who contributed to the *Dissent* issue. Miranda was born in Manhattan of Puerto Rican heritage, and he grew up in Inwood, a blue-collar neighborhood near the island's northern tip cut off by subway switching yards from downtown. The area evolved from being the home of Jewish and Irish immigrants to the home of Hispanic—often Dominican— newcomers. The basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabar grew up a generation before in the same neighborhood; and another generation earlier, a boyish Henry Kissinger scampered around the streets of nearby Washington Heights. This end of Manhattan has long been reserved for the latest arrivals to find their way in a new homeland, often tossing off new cultural permutations in the process.

Miranda graduated from Hunter College High School and went off to idyllic Wesleyan University—a small Connecticut school best known for educating the gentry's offspring—where he combined the hip-hop of his home turf with a solid grounding in Wesleyan's more traditional student theater company. While a sophomore at Wesleyan, he began working on a musical based on a book by Quiara Alegría Hudes that told the story of the lives of his generation in the largely Dominican-American neighborhood of Washington Heights. The show, *In the Heights*, moved from Connecticut to

Off-Broadway, and then to a Broadway production in 2008, winning four Tony Awards and a Pulitzer Prize nomination. Miranda—like the Berlins, Kerns, Hammersteins, Rodgers, Harts, and Sondheims before—was setting Broadway on fire by bringing new energy from the ever-evolving life of the city around them.

But *In the Heights* was just the beginning. In 2015, Miranda's hip-hop interpretation of Ron Chernow's authoritative biography of Alexander Hamilton broke every mold on Broadway, starting out with its two-month run at the Public Theater. *Hamilton* tells the story of one of the country's most overlooked founding parents through the lens of the generations infused with the sounds of what the city has become.

New York and Broadway—like all human creations and the people who make them—die a bit every day. Simultaneously, they are reborn. No matter how much New York is tamed; the city still bursts forth with elemental human energy. And Broadway theater—like the city that gave it life—continues to confront and define the American experience by enabling newcomers to engage with traditions that have long been in place.

September 12, 2016

Endnotes

1   Commission on the Year 2000, *New York Ascendant: The Report of the Commission on the Year 2000*, (New York, NY, 1987).

2   Jim Sleeper, *Dissent: In Search of New York* (Special Issue), (1987).

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