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Why Cincinnati, Why Over-the-Rhine?

This book started as an examination of a cultural conflict over who should live in a particular neighborhood, who should design its physical fabric, and who should decide. The contest stemmed from an effort by the city, state, and federal authorities to use recently developed historic preservation techniques to revitalize a poor, predominantly black, inner-city tract called Over-the-Rhine, 1 110 blocks (362 acres) of mostly nineteenth-century architecture on the northern edge of Cincinnati's central business district. The nature of the neighborhood, the national popularity of historic preservation as a neighborhood conservation treatment, and the length of the battle (1979–85) over the appropriate social and physical environment for this old and richly historic area seemed of sufficient significance and general interest to warrant a study of how anti-preservationists beat city hall and what pro-preservationists might learn from it.

But we soon discovered two things that extended the scope and duration of our work. First, the proposal of historic preservation as an appropriate treatment for rejuvenating Over-the-Rhine stood as merely one in a long string of cultural transformation programs devised for the area since the 1920s, when the city government first embraced the manipulation of the social and physical environment for broadly cultural purposes
and when the Queen City emerged as a nationally recognized and applauded leader in this new field. Second, a double shift in the history of these treatments for Over-the-Rhine and other old neighborhoods around downtown took place at mid-century. Between 1920 and 1950 the city government called such neighborhoods “slums” and tried to eliminate them by two methods. After 1950, however, officials redefined them as “inner-city” neighborhoods and sought to conserve them with a plethora of programs.

These discoveries raised two kinds of questions. At one level of analysis we wondered how the city government justified some very expensive attempts to solve the slum problem by clearing out dwellings that housed thousands of people. What did the city propose to do with those uprooted people, and how did it hope to accomplish it? Why and how did some neighborhoods, such as Over-the-Rhine, survive the slum clearance campaign? Why did the inner-city conservation campaign after
1950 leave Over-the-Rhine near the top of municipal priorities in the 1970s? Why did the attempt to apply historic preservation as a revitalization technique provoke such a long (and nasty) fight in the late 1970s and 1980s? How might we account for the outcome of that argument? And was that outcome inevitable?

At another level, we wondered how to account for the shift at mid-century from slum clearance to inner-city conservation and why that shift yielded a proliferation of treatments for the inner city. We suspected that the answers to these questions would be crucial to working out explanations for the "lower-level" questions that would not trivialize, patronize, or demonize any of the actors in our story. To resolve the two higher questions, we used simple techniques. We looked at how our Cincinnati actors defined problems. We looked for patterns in what they said and did not say and in what they did and did not do as they attempted to solve their problems. And we placed these patterns of talk, action, and inaction in the context of contemporary general discussions of American civilization that might have informed their thinking and activities.

We concluded that the mid-century shift from slum clearance to inner-city conservation stemmed from a revulsion against totalitarian-
ism in Europe and conformity at home that changed the way Americans thought about their society, culture, and cities. The rationale for slum clearance took as its chief concern the welfare of the whole city. It defined the social mission of the city as the fostering of cosmopolitanism (the sharing of ideas and behavioral traits among groups of people without destroying each group's sense of its given and distinctive cultural identity), and viewed slums as cancerous entities that posed the most serious threat to the cosmopolitan project.

This slum clearance regimen seemed both sensible and responsibly democratic in its day. But in the 1950s it looked like a variety of cultural engineering resembling that associated with the outrages committed by the Nazi and Soviet governments on their own people during the late 1930s and 1940s. This juxtaposition produced a new mode of thinking that took the autonomy of individuals as its chief concern, defined the social mission of the city as the fostering of cultural individualism (the pursuit by individuals of their self-constructed cultures/life styles), and regarded inner-city neighborhoods as scruffy but redeemable entities essential for the full flowering of cultural individualism, which required by definition the creation of widely diverse types of residential places to accommodate the tastes of widely diverse types of self-constructed life styles.

Over-the-Rhine provides an ideal vehicle for the exploration of the broad range of treatments generated by these two modes of thought for old neighborhoods around downtown because our actors seriously considered or tried all of them. Before mid-century the two slum clearance techniques consisted of zoning inner-city neighborhoods for non-residential land uses or demolishing them to make way for community building public housing projects. After 1950, conservation treatments for inner-city tracts included remodeling them as chic downtown residential neighborhoods; rehabilitating them as low-income housing districts; using them as models for improving the participation of poor people in neighborhood planning and plan implementation; loading them with public and private social service agencies responsive to the problems of the poor as defined by the poor; reserving them as homes for members of minority groups (African Americans and "urban" Appalachians in our case) who felt deprived of their right to practice cultural individualism; and using historic preservation techniques to conserve
them as places of residence for low-income minorities, homeless people, alcoholics, and more prosperous people regardless of their race or lifestyle.

This book, then, uses the treatment of Over-the-Rhine by Cincinnati's city government to illustrate some of the consequences of the two modes of thought about American cities and their neighborhoods. We especially hope to point out some neglected explanations for the decline that afflicted Over-the-Rhine and other old neighborhoods in American cities during the twentieth century, particularly after 1960. Over-the-Rhine's population peaked at about 44,475 in 1900 and fell gradually to about 30,000 by 1960. A decade later that number had shrunk by half, and included 5,380 African Americans, a newly significant minority in the neighborhood. In 1990, census takers counted just 9,752 people in Over-the-Rhine, 6,875 of them (71 percent) African Americans. By then, too, more than a quarter of the neighborhood's apartments stood vacant and the area's median household income was just $5,000, well below the figure for the city, $21,006.

These impoverished people lived in the city's most crime-ridden turf, a territory haunted by pimps, drug pushers, prostitutes, thieves, and muggers. Over-the-Rhine also accounted for more than its share of the city's domestic violence cases, street fights, and murders. For the most part, the criminals picked on their neighbors. But occasionally they hit an unlucky outsider, as in the 1996 robbery-killing of a popular young, white rock musician who worked in a nightspot along the short strip of restaurants, bars, nightclubs, and coffeehouses that catered to young adults and middle-aged people, mostly whites, some from Cincinnati's outer neighborhoods or suburbs and some businesspersons or tourists from other cities.

The persistence of such conditions and events in one of the city's most visible and historic neighborhoods generated continuing concerns about its future. Many of these concerns now focused on the prevalence of drugs and prostitution in the neighborhood, the blatancy of which prompted the Over-the-Rhine Chamber of Commerce, a recently established improvement association, to run an ad in a metropolitan daily newspaper listing the names and addresses of twenty-five persons arrested in the neighborhood for soliciting or for drug-related offenses during a four-month period in 1996. "Your illegal activities," read the ad,
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"have brought degradation and suffering to the citizens who live and work here, especially our children . . . we ask that you stay out . . . unless you plan to help us build a healthier, more liveable community."

These pleas touched city council member Phil Heimlich, Cincinnati’s premier law and order legislator in the mid-1990s. He responded by securing the passage of yet another treatment for Over-the-Rhine: its designation as a “crime exclusion zone” (an idea borrowed from Portland, Oregon). The provisions of his ordinance included banning from the neighborhood for ninety days non-residents arrested there on drug or prostitution charges and extending the exile to one year for those convicted of those crimes.3

Others who worried about Over-the-Rhine in the mid-1990s took a larger view that depicted the neighborhood as part of a problem that threatened the welfare of the whole city and its mission as a facilitator of cultural individualism. They contended that thirty years of wrong-headed policies had converted Over-the-Rhine into part of Cincinnati’s “second” black ghetto. And residential apartheid, these critics contended, mocked the idea of cultural individualism by denying blacks the right to a full and free choice of better homes in neighborhoods of their preference or design. The situation especially embittered middle-class blacks, for it not only discriminated against these successful adults but also reminded them and their children that even those who secured good educations and decent jobs, built families, and conducted socially and civically responsible lives stood little chance of escaping the confines of their involuntary residential enclaves, including the gilded ones in outlying and suburban neighborhoods.

In this view, then, the persistence and growth of the ghetto, America’s most visible stamp of disdain for African Americans since the time of slavery, constitutes Cincinnati’s major problem at the approach of the twenty-first century. It encourages social and civic alienation among African American adults and undermines the confidence of middle-class blacks in their ability to compete on everything from standardized tests to on-the-job performance. It tempts their children to drop out and into the underclass. It fosters a climate of fear, misunderstanding, and mistrust among the races that erodes faith on both sides of the color line in the city’s political system and economic prospects. It threatens the viability of the city as an agency for the nurturing of cultural pluralism,
whether of the trait-sharing or multi-cultural variety. And as in the 1960s, the persisting ghetto in the 1990s frustrates attempts to solve other problems because attacks on such issues as sexism, education, affordable housing, poverty, and the enrichment of the wealthy at the expense of the middle class and poor get caught up in the interracial crossfire and are deflected or buried.6

The concerns of this book focus on Over-the-Rhine and Cincinnati. But people familiar with the experience of other American cities will find our story characteristic of processes occurring elsewhere in the nation. We concede the uniqueness of the details of what happened in Cincinnati. But they are particularities rather than peculiarities, for the plot of the drama, its divisions into acts or periods, its dramatis personae, and the issues, concerns, and problems they confronted and the solutions they devised mirror the drama played out in other places.7