The Cincinnati Metropolitan Master Plan of 1948 eschewed the idea of rehabilitation as the best treatment for slums. Instead, the plan proposed to tear down slums and redevelop the land for other uses, a proposition that rested on the conventional planning wisdom of the past, including the ideas of social determinism, trait-sharing cosmopolitanism, and the creation of competent communities along the lines developed for public housing projects in the 1930s. The plan of 1948 called for just such a redevelopment project for Over-the-Rhine as part of its larger program to offset the more rapid rate of suburban as opposed to city growth and to avert the economic and residential decline of Cincinnati as the dynamic core of the metropolitan area. As the principal solution to these problems the plan called for the demolition of all slums to make way for industrial and low-density residential redevelopment projects in the inner city and an expressway system, each of which would displace thousands of people, especially blacks, as well as many institutions and businesses.

The planners of 1948 intended to handle the relocation issue as part of their larger effort to promote citywide social stability and civic pride. This broad scheme covered outer- as well as inner-city areas and rested on the conviction that unregulated urban growth eventually "reaches a

point of diminishing returns in terms of the advantages which a city, as a social community, should provide for its inhabitants." The plan proposed to solve this problem by organizing all of the Queen City's residential districts into communities of 20,000 to 40,000 people, not self-governed but "self-contained in respect to the everyday life of their inhabitants except for such facilities and services . . . located in or supplied by Cincinnati as the central city, and by institutions serving the Metropolitan Area."\(^5\)

This conception of the metropolitan residential area as a cluster of medium-sized communities stemmed from an optimistic interpretation of the history of the metropolis that made the grandiose scheme seem plausible. The planners depicted Cincinnati as a product of the growth of a plethora of neighborhoods around the original settlement, the
annexation of a number of them to Cincinnati, and the grouping of some of them into self-contained communities by hills and valleys. This seemed most “fortunate” because it tended “to preserve as the city grew, some of the better qualities of small town life, such as the spirit of neighborliness and the sense of attachment to locality.” Specifically, the planners asserted, small-town people “participate to a greater extent in community activities; a larger percentage goes to the polls; a higher proportion contribute to the Community Chest; more are interested in public affairs.” And “here in the Cincinnati Area, to a greater degree than in most large cities, residents enjoy the economic and cultural advantages of a metropolis while living in residential localities small enough to satisfy the urge for intimacy in home surroundings and a social life in scale with the average family.”

Unfortunately, history had not adequately completed the task of community building, and the plan proposed “to strengthen the present
rudimentary...composition of the Metropolitan Area...to form an organized 'cluster' of communities, each further divided into neighborhoods." The boundaries of each community should encompass 20,000 to 40,000 people on 1,000 to 2,000 acres of land and be drawn with reference to separators such as topographic features, industrial belts, railroads, large parks, greenbelts, cemeteries, institutions, and expressways. Each community would be connected to others by intercommunity thoroughfares and in turn to expressways leading to the larger metropolitan community of work, entertainment, education, and social and recreational activities.5

The plan cited several features as critical to the viability of each community. Ideally, each should be served by a high school, one or two junior high schools, and several neighborhood elementary schools. Each should also possess "a community business district" and near it a civic center composed of a branch library, a recreation center, a health center, a branch post office, and, in some cases, appropriate semi-public buildings. In addition, each community should possess both single-family homes and apartments of various sizes to accommodate "young couples...growing families and...elderly persons," thereby eliminating the necessity for a family "to move away from friends, neighbors, churches and other associations as it arrives at various stages of the life cycle."6

The community scheme of the plan of 1948 presented each community as separate but equal, and proposed to stabilize for a generation the population of each community and to moderate the rate of incursion by newcomers from other communities. Yet it also provided for racial, ethnic, and class heterogeneity within communities while endorsing residential segregation by race, ethnicity, and class. The mechanism for doing this was the idea of neighborhood, for in forming each community the planners tried to group "traditional" and therefore segregated neighborhoods, an arrangement that frequently put diverse neighborhoods in one community. In such cases each segregated neighborhood functioned as a social unit while the diverse residents of the various neighborhoods intermingled in the community's civic, recreational, and commercial facilities that served all the neighborhoods, an arrangement that made the community the crucible for encouraging individuals to pursue self-fulfillment through trait-sharing cosmopolitanism and civic patriotism.

According to the plan of 1948, a neighborhood should contain 4,000

to 8,000 people on 400 to 800 acres of land. Each neighborhood should be connected to its community and the metropolis by the thoroughfare and expressway systems and bounded, but not entered, by interneighborhood streets. Moreover, each neighborhood should have all the attributes of a community except a civic center, that is, an elementary school with a playground as well as additional playgrounds where necessary, one or several neighborhood shopping centers, and perhaps additional local shopping areas consisting of a few stores. And each neighborhood should have some mix of single-family homes and apartments, with the proportion of single-family homes increasing with distance from the central business district.  

The planners of 1948 recognized that they had to apply their neighborhood and community conception to a real city, not an abstraction. To define that reality, they used a historical analysis that pictured the
metropolis roughly as a series of concentric circles of older and newer neighborhoods, with the older neighborhoods at the core, the middle-aged in the next ring, and the new ones on the periphery. This analysis also attributed a common life cycle to all neighborhoods and depicted a city decaying from a process by which old residential areas fell to non-residential uses and neighborhoods deteriorated as blacks and poor whites spread from the oldest and worst neighborhoods into contiguous and declining middle-aged neighborhoods. Each neighborhood, said the plan, experienced an initial period of growth, then stability, then decline, with changes "in the type of population coming into the neighborhood, . . . shift from owner to tenant occupancy, . . . the conversion into smaller apartments of larger homes," heavier traffic, more institutions, and the incursion of industry or commercial facilities.

Finally comes the nadir, exemplified in Cincinnati by the basin, which the plan identified as a deteriorated area.

In the oldest, and hence most centrally located neighborhoods, not only will the deterioration and obsolescence of the housing have proceeded to a marked degree, . . . but the pattern of the land use may also have changed radically from its original character into what is familiarly known as slum or blighted areas, or in this report, "deteriorated areas." The best examples in Cincinnati of . . . neighborhoods that have reached, or are approaching the end of their life-cycle . . . are found, of course, in the Basin area. Here neighborhoods that were in their time among the finest in the city, have become through force of circumstance ripe for the most complete redevelopment.

The plan of 1948 then classified Cincinnati's neighborhoods by age groups and by the housing conditions in each age group, a classification that yielded five categories of neighborhoods and recommendations for handling each. Deteriorated areas received the most drastic treatment: "complete clearance and a fresh start through redevelopment for either private or public use, in accordance with the master plan." The planners scheduled declining but not yet deteriorated areas for "rehabilitation," a temporary expedient to delay complete clearance and redevelopment that involved the demolition of the worst structures, reduction of heterogeneity in land use and of residential overcrowding, repair and modernization of dwelling units, and the introduction of playgrounds and
schools. Middle-aged neighborhoods fell under the “conservation” rubric, a program to prevent deterioration carried out by Planning Commission staff, who would induce property owners to modernize buildings, adhere to the master plan, and help arrange financing for such efforts. Newer neighborhoods required only “protection” through adequate zoning and careful planning. The last category, “preparation for new growth,” applied to neighborhoods “just beginning to develop” and involved an assessment of the future character of the neighborhood and community structure to shape the size and nature of these youngest of urban places.¹⁰

Through these programs the residential strategy of the plan of 1948 aimed to encourage suburbanization while preventing the potentially devastating civic and fiscal effects of Cincinnati’s eventual transformation into one great slum. The plan sought also to preserve the area’s segregated social and racial geography and to regulate the neighborhood filter-down process that facilitated residential segregation. It encouraged rapid population growth “in the major peripheral communities” of the metropolitan area and modest increases or decreases “in the built-up portions of the urban area lying between the Basin and the peripheral communities.” For the basin itself, the plan projected a 50 percent population decrease by 1970, “assuming adequate redevelopment,” and a 27 percent decrease without it. The plan also foresaw a destination for that excess basin population by observing that certain “middle-aged sections” (Avondale, Clifton, Cumminsville, Norwood, and Walnut Hills) would experience a change “in the composition and character of the population and in types of residential structures.”¹¹ In short, the plan anticipated that some poor white and black inhabitants of the basin displaced by low-density redevelopment would move out to the next band of neighborhoods on the north and the east, where programs of conservation and rehabilitation would slow the inevitable descent of these neighborhoods into slums requiring clearance and reconstruction.

This vision of outward growth made the redevelopment of Cincinnati’s basin slums a key element in the plan’s scheme to reverse the decay of the Queen City as the dynamic center of the metropolis. The redevelopment package contained industrial, commercial, and private residential components, but it also proposed to endow the basin with two
additional public housing communities, each composed of three neighborhoods. One, called Linconia, encompassed the black neighborhoods west of Music Hall and north of the Laurel Homes and Lincoln Court public housing projects. The other, dubbed Uptown by the planners, occupied the territory north of the central business district still known popularly as Over-the-Rhine.12

The planners included but a brief list of redevelopment proposals for Uptown, and they provided no explanation for the meaning of the name (the rationale for Linconia seems self-evident) and suggested no special scheme to recall the area's German past. But the plan laid out drastic changes for Uptown, especially its community thoroughfare scheme. It designated Vine Street as the area's north to south "axis thorofare" and called for the construction of a viaduct running from the convergence of Vine Street and Clifton Avenue to Race Street at Findlay Street, the widening of west Findlay Street to Central Parkway to encourage traffic to bypass the community on the west, and the widening and extension of Liberty Street into a thoroughfare connecting proposed expressways on the east and west flanks of Uptown. The plan also proposed an east bypass around Uptown by widening Clifton Avenue and extending it to Liberty and Sycamore Streets.13

Other proposals for the new community proved more modest. The plan recommended the erection of a new building for Peaslee Elementary School in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, designated Rothenberg Elementary School to serve the Liberty neighborhood, and suggested the construction of a new elementary school for the Washington Park neighborhood in the north part of the park itself. The plan noted, too, that the Board of Education intended to convert Woodward High School into a junior high school and to build a new high school near Lincoln Park Drive and Central Avenue between the communities of Linconia and Uptown (the plan did not discuss racial integration or segregation in the public schools). The plan suggested the laying out of play areas around all the schools in Uptown and the expansion of the Findlay Street playground to encompass an entire block. It recommended the concentration of commercial facilities on one street (either Walnut, Race, or Elm Street) and suggested the construction of the community civic center for Uptown in the vicinity of Liberty and Vine Streets.14

Finally, the plan of 1948 proposed the retention of some industrial
land uses in Uptown. It noted disapprovingly that printing, laundry, brewery, and “miscellaneous” industries intruded among residences throughout Uptown, while denser concentrations of diverse industries occurred on the east side of the community along Reading Road and on the northwest along McMicken Street and Central Avenue. In the new community, the plan cautioned, industry should be restricted to the periphery of the area, though the plan contained no industrial redevelopment project for Uptown.¹⁵

These alterations and the clearance and redevelopment of Uptown would have destroyed both the physical and social fabric of the area, of course. But Over-the-Rhine survived because the Planning Commission, the city administration, and city council took as their top priorities slum clearance and redevelopment and expressway construction in the West End and pushed hard for their implementation. Indeed, Alfred Bettman, who chaired the Planning Commission from 1930 to 1945, played a leading part during the early 1940s in drafting both the Ohio and the federal redevelopment laws of 1949 that together furnished the legal basis and federal financial support for tearing down and rebuilding inner-city neighborhoods.¹⁶

Both these laws obligated the city government to assure the availability of relocation housing for persons displaced by urban redevelopment, a problem that seemed manageable until its complication by the question of race. This issue appeared early in the clearance and redevelopment process because the Planning Commission proposed to start the program in African American tracts in the West End, after which it intended to send bulldozers to Over-the-Rhine, the predominantly white territory. Council responded favorably to this proposition and authorized two urban redevelopment bond issues for voter approval in November 1951 to cover the city’s share of the cost of the federally subsidized project.

But city council also banned racial discrimination in redevelopment residential programs, a policy that Charles Stamm, the city official in charge of redevelopment, initially welcomed with enthusiasm. It would, he thought, help solve several problems, including the notion that “certain groups must be kept in certain places.” It would also, he contended, help raise housing standards generally and contribute to the solution of social problems “rising from the slums.”¹⁷

Yet Stamm worried that the anti-discrimination measure combined
with the involuntary removal of African Americans might undermine support for the bond issues in both white and black neighborhoods. To avert this, he called on the Mayor's Friendly Relations Committee for assistance. He wanted to counter rumors in the black West End that equated slum clearance with "Negro clearance" by assuring residents of the availability of relocation housing within the city of Cincinnati. He also wanted the Committee to help prepare for the movement of black families into white neighborhoods by persuading residents of such places that the arrival of blacks would not lower property values.18

The Committee voted to help out, and both bond issues carried the precincts on the redevelopment sites. But they failed to pass muster with voters citywide (one lost by a margin of 61 percent and the other by 58 percent), a defeat ascribed by the Better Housing League of Greater Cincinnati to fears among most voters that relocation might introduce blacks into white neighborhoods or convert racially mixed areas into black enclaves. Stamm thought such fears might yet be overcome, however, and he turned next for assistance to the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority. CMHA had also adopted an anti-discrimination policy in response to civil rights advocates who claimed that its once popular large-scale community development projects isolated tenants, stigmatized them as poor, and destroyed their sense of themselves as individuals capable of making choices about their futures. Under the new strategy CMHA retained the old projects but agreed to reserve for relocation housing new ones that would be smaller and lack their own commercial, civic, and social facilities. Relocation units also would be scattered around the city so that tenants would have a choice of neighborhoods in which to live and could use the same local facilities as other residents.19

Implementing this integrationist policy in the 1950s proved impossible, even though the CMHA secured federal allocations sufficient to build as many as four or five projects. Most people did not want in their neighborhood a relocation public housing project for slum dwellers displaced from the basin's West End for fear that such projects would lower property values, increase juvenile delinquency and crime, and provide vehicles for the introduction of poor blacks into white or racially mixed but unstable middle-class areas. Between 1952 and 1954 the CMHA abandoned four relocation public housing projects in the face of stiff and racially charged neighborhood opposition.20
Meanwhile, Stamm had moved away from racial residential integration in his efforts to alleviate the relocation housing problem and get redevelopment back on track. First, he helped set up a homogeneous community development project for whites (Forest Park) on 3,400 acres of undeveloped land in Cincinnati's northern suburbs. The land had been part of a federal government greenbelt town project that in the 1930s yielded a white community development project called Greenhills. Then Stamm linked basin redevelopment projects with rehabilitation and conservation treatments in the band of hilltop neighborhoods around the basin. The impetus for this move came from the passage of the federal Housing Act of 1954, which provided subsidies for rehabilitation and conservation as well as slum clearance and redevelopment under the new rubric of “urban renewal.” Under this program the city launched a redevelopment project in the lower West End in the Kenyon Barr area, the construction of which began in 1955 and displaced additional African Americans. As a relocation site the city government selected for its first rehabilitation and conservation effort the partially integrated Avondale-Corryville neighborhoods to the north and northeast of the basin, places in which it hoped to accommodate poor blacks displaced from the West End but without creating another slum.

Planning for the Kenyon Barr and Avondale-Corryville projects delayed for two years action on the 1948 plan's proposal for a community development public housing project in Over-the-Rhine. But Charles Stamm in 1956 persuaded city council to make it the next item on the slum clearance agenda and filed with the federal government a proposal to survey the area and write a detailed plan for the project. Yet the project did not go forward. Instead, the city manager withdrew the application in 1957 and the Planning Commission incorporated the neighborhood into a new approach to renewal planning in the basin: the designation of Over-the-Rhine, the central riverfront, and the central business district as a single renewal area within which to carry out redevelopment projects one at a time.

This new approach to urban renewal in the heart of the city made it possible to mitigate the housing relocation problem by including large chunks of non-residential territory in the renewal area and by concentrating clearance and redevelopment in that lightly populated territory. But the Planning Commission went further than that. It inaugurated the
new policy not only by placing the Over-the-Rhine slum clearance proposal on its inactive list but also by indicating that it would consider using that turf as a residential neighborhood oriented to downtown rather than as a site for a community development public housing project. Meanwhile, the city focused its clearance and redevelopment activities on commercial properties within the central business district well south of Over-the-Rhine and pushed ahead with the Avondale-Corryville conservation and rehabilitation project.

This new approach to treating the basin left the physical and social environment of Over-the-Rhine intact but also suggested in vague terms a future for the neighborhood as a residential appendage to the central business district rather than as the object of slum clearance and community development housing. That proposition might or might not involve clearing the site, for city officials had already acquiesced in the rehabilitation of old structures in one such neighborhood (Mt. Adams) and had sanctioned in another the construction of a new and racially integrated residential complex (Park Town) as part of downtown’s “new” West End. Both of these potential precedents, moreover, targeted middle- and/or upper-income people as ideal residents, an indication that Over-the-Rhine as a downtown neighborhood would not provide much if any room for the city’s “social junk” and would not need the attributes of a competent community.

The new approach to downtown and Over-the-Rhine rested upon a new conception of the city with profound consequences. It rendered obsolete the idea of cosmopolitan cultural engineering and the various projects flowing from that program, including metropolitan master planning. It also ushered in an era in which the phrase “inner city” replaced “slum” as the designation for the area around downtown and in which that terrain became contested turf for people defining their own cultures by designing a neighborhood of their choice.