PART TWO

NEW VISIONS AND VISIONARIES
THE failure of slum clearance and community development residential projects as the final solution to Cincinnati's basin problem led to a rethinking of the issue that, as we have seen, initially suggested two new treatments: conservation and rehabilitation to prevent the spread of blight, and the possibility of rehabilitating some inner-city tracts as residential neighborhoods somehow related to the central business district. This rethinking also produced a new understanding of the city that assigned to it a new social mission, changed the relationship of the municipality to all neighborhoods, and generated additional and often incompatible treatments for troubled neighborhoods, especially Over-the-Rhine. Most important, the new understanding changed the relationship of the city government to neighborhoods because it posited for the municipality a new social mission centered on facilitating the pursuit by individuals of their self-defined cultures and lifestyles, a notion that suggested the utility of encouraging residents to control their neighborhoods for the purpose of designing their physical and social fabrics.

The new understanding of the city and the idea of neighborhood autonomy derived ultimately not from local circumstances but from a general revolt against the notion of the social (and biological) determination
of culture. This now seemed a dangerous mode of thinking because of its association in Europe with fascism, Nazism, and communism. These ideologies differed in detail, of course, but they struck many influential Americans in the 1940s and 1950s as totalitarian social engineering movements that resembled democratic cosmopolitanism because they projected cultural blueprints of the future and preached sacrifice for the welfare of the whole as necessary for realizing them. In addition, such ideas in the context of the Cold War seemed deplorable because they might create a “soft” totalitarianism, a democratic but conformist mass society incapable of appreciating, let alone achieving, cosmopolitanism or any form of cultural pluralism.

The revolt against determinism, in short, suggested the utility of exalting “the ultimate integrity of the individual” by encouraging people to define their own life styles and cultures, a culturally individualistic imperative that inaugurated an era of identity politics. This kind of cultural individualism deplored conformity, took individuals rather than groups as the basic units of concern, attributed to these individuals a need for self-fulfillment through the definition of their own life styles (cultures), and suggested the appropriateness of realizing those life styles through affiliation with self-constructed groups. This apotheosis of the autonomous/liberated individual and of self-actualization through participation in self-constructed groups deflected attention from the idea of the public interest defined as the welfare of the whole, rendered suspect both “experts” and governments as potential repres­sors of the right of individual self-determination, and regarded inter­group conflict (in the past and present) as a normal method by which individuals might establish for themselves a satisfying way of life and spaces in which to live it.

Cultural individualism also transformed the discourse about down­town. The new emphasis on personal needs and their variety implied not only a tolerance for segregated neighborhoods but also a new interest in the mixing of classes, races, and/or ethnic groups. It drew a particularly sharp distinction between the city and its suburbs, characterizing suburbia as homogeneous and serene and the city as the site of heterogeneity, concentration, mixed land uses, and excitement. In this view the central business district seemed not only the chief center for entertainment and business facilities but also a logical location for chic new resi-
dential developments to help make downtown as busy by night as by day and to boost Cincinnati in its competition with its suburbs and with other cities around the country.

The new understanding of the city also cast a transforming light on slums around the central business district that made them appear worthy of conservation for a variety of residential uses, including downtown ones. Their mixed land uses seemed a convenient and delightful contrast to the homogeneity and lower density of outlying neighborhoods, while their variegated stock of old buildings on relatively inexpensive real estate looked intriguingly flexible. These characteristics opened a broad range of potential uses for and users of old neighborhoods, especially when they possessed a rich and complex past that could be interpreted to support the claims for neighborhood control by one or another group of users or potential users. That combination of characteristics fit Over-the-Rhine and made it attractive both to people who wanted to adapt it as a staging ground for mobility and to those who preferred to adapt it for a more stable population because it matched or could be made to match the self-defined needs of current residents, new residents, or some combination of both.

Above all, the new understanding of the city contended that individuals should be consulted about the design of their physical and social environments so that the look and feel of the neighborhoods matched their self-constructed life styles. This provided the basis for the adoption by city government of techniques for involving as directly as possible the residents of neighborhoods in policy making on questions affecting their neighborhood, a process interpreted by some as a formula for community control by residents, the source of a neighborhood organization revolution against the decisive intrusion by outsiders, including those in city hall, in decision-making processes. This is what happened in Over-the-Rhine, and it sparked a long struggle over who should live in the neighborhood, whether and how it should be redesigned, and who should decide.

In the course of this struggle the word “slum” virtually disappeared as people began to apply the term “inner city” to the band of neighborhoods around the central business district and to assume that such places were, were becoming, or ought to become the special home of blacks who might want to live there. Those few who challenged that assumption set
off a long conflict to preserve and control Over-the-Rhine, a once scorned physical environment that now seemed indispensable for the playing out of their various scenarios for its future. The conflict began as a consequence of the development of a central business district plan that called for revitalization of Over-the-Rhine and some other parts of the inner city as chic neighborhoods on the downtown fringe for middle- and upper-income persons regardless of ethnicity or race. This proposal prompted tenacious opposition from social workers, black racial separatists, urban Appalachian advocates, and white community organizers of the poor and homeless, all of whom complained that the implementation of the proposal would drive up rents and involuntarily displace low-income people.

All this took place within a political system in which all parties embraced citizen participation governing processes but that otherwise changed significantly in only one way. The Republican Party in 1957 pushed through a charter amendment that retained the non-partisan ballot but replaced proportional representation (PR) for minority political groups with an electoral system that awarded seats on council to the nine candidates with the most votes. The GOP hoped that this individualization of the representational method would kill the Charter Party, the group that engineered the adoption of PR in the 1920s. Instead, Charterites ran their own slates and, like the Democrats, invariably won a seat or two on council until 1971. That year they joined the Democratic Party in a coalition that terminated fourteen years of Republican hegemony and dominated council until 1985, when the Democrats withdrew from the alliance. All but once thereafter the Democrats won majorities on council, but they never shut out either the Republicans or the Charterites.