**Redevelopment or Gentrification? Changing Neighborhoods Then and Now**

**By Shana Laski, Dramaturg**

Though *Radio Golf* is a story rooted deeply in time and place to 1990s Pittsburgh, the world of the play reflects the rise of the ever-present phenomenon of gentrification. Wilson saw a reinvigorated push for urban renewal and redevelopment in communities of low income, low housing value, and high crime rates as he was writing his esteemed Cycle. Though It seemed like the efforts to revitalize these seemingly failing neighborhoods would provide upward mobility and support to those living there, the side effects of “revitalization” took their toll on the communities they are supposed to serve. The play interrogates the ethical dilemma faced by Harmond as a Black man of means in Pittsburgh: invest money into his struggling hometown by destroying relics of the past or preserve a historic community.

Throughout the play, Harmond and Roosevelt refer to “fed money,” and “declaring blight” in anticipation of the launch of their biggest project. This refers to strategies used by cities and developmental groups to take advantage of federal programs encouraging urban renewal. An area of public or private land can be declared “blighted” if it has a certain large percentage of vacant lots, abandoned or vacant buildings, substandard structures, and properties delinquent in their property taxes, such as 1839 Wylie. This results in an appraisal gap, meaning the market price of the property is higher than its appraised value due to a lack of comparable property sales in the area. This creates an environment in which letting buildings fall into disrepair or abandonment is easier than refinancing loans, which makes these properties more attractive to large scale investors like Bedford Hills Development. Harmond and Roosevelt are banking on the blight because it will allow them to receive federal money to support their venture, probably in the form of an Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) to revitalize America’s dying urban centers.

Another strategy meant to support Black social mobility was the FCC Minority Tax Certificate that Roosevelt takes advantage of to buy WBTZ Radio. This grant was only available to corporations in which over 50% of the voting shares were owned by ethnic minorities, or similar ownership of over 20% of the total equity in the case of a limited partnership. These facilitated the capitalization of broadcasting and cable acquisitions by minority owned firms. Additionally, buyers could use the policy to bargain for a reduction of the purchase price with tax savings that accrue to the seller like Roosevelt does.

Pittsburgh was not alone in its experience of shifting demographics, cycles of poverty, and overturn of communities at the hands of urban development. Washington DC and even our own Montgomery County have both felt the effects of changing cities that do not cater to the needs of their long-time inhabitants. This pattern of displacement and community destruction has been happening all over the country on different scales and continues to this day. A great example of this in our own backyard is the redevelopment and transformation of Southwest DC’s riverfront beginning in the early 2000s. In her article, *Southwest DC: A Cycle of Urban Renewal and ‘Revitalization,* business researcher Quinlyn R Spellmeyer writes “While the project successfully created luxury apartment buildings, townhomes, and condominiums in an effort to bring wealthy white residents to the cities, it also drove low income and minority residents out of their well-established communities, ultimately even being coined as a “negro removal” project. Similarly, while the project was successful in developing these residential buildings, it was unsuccessful in creating a lasting community, ultimately forcing the area to go through another round of revitalization, which once again would force current residents out of the region... Ultimately, the urban renewal experience of Southwest DC highlights the trends urban renewal would have in the rest of the United States.” There are striking similarities to the process described by Wilson of rebranding the Hill District to “Bedford Hills” as Southwest DC became “The Wharf.”

Though the intentions may be positive and geared toward community betterment, the negative effects of gentrification typically fall on those who cannot participate in the economic prosperity promised by developers: unprivileged residents of color. By forcing out local businesses and homeowners, entire communities get pushed further and further out from the places they call home and alienated by the incoming residents with no connection to the neighborhood. Wilson’s lead businessmen become the poles of a moral dilemma that continues to play out in America today.