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ABSTRACT
In 1968, riots broke-out across Washington, DC upon word of Martin Luther King Jr.’s death. These riots destroyed three separate neighborhoods, but nowhere was the devastation as great as in Columbia Heights. A once prominent neighborhood with a thriving business district, the riots turned Columbia Heights into a barren wasteland of burnt-out buildings and empty lots. Only recently has development come back to Columbia Heights. This paper set out to answer certain key questions: Why was development in Columbia Heights nonexistent for thirty years? Who was to blame? Why has development now begun in the neighborhood?
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Situated atop the bluffs just north of downtown Washington, DC sits Columbia Heights, the first neighborhood to develop after the implementation of L’Enfant’s plan (Map 1). Originally a farming community outside the federal city, the development of Columbia Heights as a residential neighborhood began shortly after the Civil War. With the expansion of the street cars to the neighborhood in the early twentieth century Columbia Heights began to grow at exceptional rates (Columbia Heights, 2004). It rapidly became one of the city’s premier residential neighborhoods and by the late 1960s had become the densest residential area in the city (National Capital Planning Commission 1967).

By the late 60s not only had Columbia Heights become a major residential center, it had become one of the most important and prominent commercial centers in the District, with 14th Street as its epicenter (Map 2). Stretching from downtown to suburban Maryland, the 14th Street corridor has been and continues to be a major commuter route which fueled its growth as a commercial corridor. Centered on the corner of 14th and Park and stretching ten blocks south, the Columbia Heights commercial district consisted of over 250 businesses, including the some of the most profitable locations of major regional chains including Riggs Bank, two Safeway grocery stores, and Lerner’s women’s apparel store. These major retailers and countless small businesses amassed annual revenues of roughly $100 million, compared to $500 million downtown (Washington Post 1971).
Map 1. District of Columbia.

Source: DConCD
In April of 1968 the neighborhood of Columbia Heights was the scene of one of the most destructive riots in American history. On the night of April 4 news broke of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination and in this neighborhood known as Washington’s Harlem, a group of people prayed that any disturbances would be kept to a minimum. Shortly after news of Dr. King’s death broke, a group started to gather at the corner of 14th and U Streets, just south of Columbia Heights. As this crowd grew in size and anger levels rose the potential for catastrophe seemed eminent (Gilbert 1968). The night saw sporadic violence but as the weekend commenced the violence grew and by the time the riots had subsided 12 people had died and 1000 buildings had been burned throughout the city. A majority of this destruction centered in Columbia Heights which saw 20 percent of its residential units badly damaged and 60 percent of its commercial buildings burned and/or looted (Development Corporation of Columbia Heights, 2004). Thirty years later little improvement had occurred. The piles of rubble had been removed but little rebuilding followed.

Since the late 1990s Columbia Heights has become one of the centers of development in Washington, DC. Washington’s economic development goals, as stipulated in the 1999 Comprehensive Plan, focus on building a stronger network of neighborhood business centers, strengthening the Central Employment Area and changing its character from strictly commercial to a more mixed development area, revitalizing old business areas and brownfields, educating the labor force, and boosting the tax base (DC Office of Planning, 1999). Much of this effort has been focused on former commercial districts that have lain abandoned for decades and transit stations. Nowhere has this strategy been more aggressively pursued than in Columbia Heights.
For years development policy in the District failed to stimulate private development in Columbia Heights. The initial promise immediately after the riots lost its air and redevelopment stagnated over the next 30 years. Why did development stagnate? What policies, or lack of policies, failed to stimulate development until the mid 1990’s? Why is Columbia Heights a unique case? Is this recent development a result of consciously adopted policies or merely a result of rising real estate costs that have forced individuals to look for cheaper real estate in what was once a “no-man’s-land”?

For 30 years Columbia Heights saw an exodus of people, rising crime rates and continued deterioration. Now, however, with considerable encouragement from the city and a strategic economic development plan that emphasizes the importance of strengthening neighborhood centers and improving neighborhood residential markets, development has flooded into Columbia Heights.

The policies and efforts put forth prior to the mid 1990s were not liberal enough or aggressive enough to bring the neighborhood back to its former glory, and to respond to how the neighborhood had changed since the time of the riots. Since the mid 90s changes in DC government policies - many of which are stipulated in the 1999 comprehensive plan, when combined with increase access due to the completion of the Columbia Heights Metro - have led to the huge building boom and a turn-around in the neighborhood.
District policy failed to stimulate development in Columbia Heights because it was outside public view and therefore less of a priority for local officials; policies that were used relied too heavily on private initiative and investment, removing development responsibility from the City.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

A Brief History of Neighborhood Decline

The causes of urban neighborhood decline are common to most American cities. The rapid suburbanization that began shortly after the end of the Second World War in many of our cities resulted in a vacant waste land of deterioration which has now become a growing preoccupation for most metro areas. As this exodus from the center continued, metropolitan areas began to become decentralized. This decentralization coincided with dramatic loses in population in city centers. In fact from 1950 – 1980 more than half of the 50 largest US cities lost population (Rappaport 2003). It is impossible not to see the effects of the decrease of population in urban neighborhoods. City after city has vast stretches of urban slums filled with abandoned, boarded up, or burnt-out buildings that used to be homes to thriving populations but now harbor crime and poverty. Population loss and suburbanization, however, are not the only culprits in neighborhood decline. Many less publicized causes have played major roles at the neighborhood level.

Causes of neighborhood decline range from the physical deterioration of the area, to the financial policies of local institutions, to changing demographic trends. No one cause characterizes decline in all cities, but a combination of many causes, physical, institutional, or social, play a major role in neighborhood change. Physical factors in neighborhood decline include technical obsolescence, changes in aesthetic tastes and preferences, and neighborhood location (Carmon 1990). Technical obsolescence refers to the problems associated with aging housing stock. In many urban neighborhoods there is a high percentage of renters and as a property ages, if the landlord fails to update the units, renters may search for alternate residences. Additionally,
owners of deteriorating buildings may look to buy elsewhere if repair costs exceed what a newer building might cost in a suburban location. The popular housing style of the time can play a major role in people’s decisions to move to or leave existing neighborhoods. The en vogue housing style might be a single family ranch house resulting in many people avoiding the large Victorian homes in some neighborhoods. Therefore personal tastes and preferences can affect local real estate markets resulting in neglected areas.

Investment in urban neighborhoods might also be affected by the quality of the infrastructure. Finally, location can play a major role in neighborhood success or failure in two ways. First, a middle class family looking for a yard for their children to play in will not be looking to invest in a town house sitting on the edge of the side walk in a downtown neighborhood. Secondly, a once thriving neighborhood can be decimated by its location in the city; it is highly unlikely that a neighborhood adjacent to a rail yard will retain existing residents or attract new residents.

Institutional causes for decline (Carmon 1990) include such things as urban renewal, which destroyed perfectly good housing stock and left thousands of acres of empty lots across the country, or inadequate zoning that fails to restrict incompatible uses. An example of this might be a city that permits a gas station in a residential area; the nuisance from the gas station could be enough to drive away area residents. Another and perhaps more significant institutional cause of decline is tax assessment. If a neighborhood is already on the decline, residents are seldom likely to stay if the city has a significant lag in property tax reassessments. With a considerable lag property owners will often be paying taxes for a property that was appraised at an amount significantly higher that its current value, forcing them to search for property elsewhere that will
no longer be a tax burden. But perhaps the most significant effect on neighborhood decline is policy (Lang 2000).

Finally, social causes of decline include an aging population, high unemployment rates, and racial impacts such as “white flight” (Carmon 1990, Lang 2000a). An aging population contributes to decline by contributing to the physical deterioration of the neighborhood. As residents age, their incomes often decline and they will be forced to live on less and less resulting in less and less money for regular maintenance, with resulting dilapidation. High unemployment rates have perhaps had the greatest impact in the industrial cities of the Midwest. With the deindustrialization of the American economy large manufacturing plants across the country shut their doors and relocated to other parts of the country and the world looking for cheaper labor and resources. These closures resulted in neighborhoods without employment opportunities, which created a large pool of unemployed persons without the skills needed to transfer to skill-intensive service sector jobs. This results in long-term unemployment, limiting the investment in existing property and a deterioration of the neighborhood.

Urban neighborhood decline is a process that occurs in waves. Decline can be blamed on all of the above but there is a pattern to decline that characterizes most cities. The first wave of decline is the flight of the middle class. With rising real incomes over the past 50 years, middle class families have been looking for a higher standard of living and their version of the “American dream”; typically this includes a house and a yard. In search of these dreams the middle class leaves the city for the suburbs where there is a lower cost of living and higher quality of life (Grogan and Proscio 2000). As the middle class flees the center city, jobs eventually follow,
leaving an employment void in the center city. The urban working class then enters a period of prolonged unemployment that perpetuates the downward spiral of the neighborhood. As the exodus of the middle class continues, the slums expand into adjacent communities. If this expansion is allowed to continue unchecked, social implosion looms. Social implosion occurs at the point where a city can no longer support the needs of its people and fails to provide even the essential services (Grogan and Proscio 2000).

All of these factors have contributed to neighborhood decline in the US and resulted in blighted neighborhoods and slums in every city. In 1949 the US government began to realize that the problems facing inner cities had become so widespread that steps had to be taken to reduce the problem and remove the blight. This first initiative was the Housing Act of 1949 (Lang 2000b). Three key components came from this legislation and they have shaped US urban policy to this day. The first, Title I, financed a slum clearance program to eliminate poor housing stock and eliminate blight. Title II increased the Federal Housing Administration’s mortgage insurance program making it easier for working class Americans to buy a house. And finally, Title III committed the federal government to building 810,000 public housing units (Lang 2000b). The goals stipulated in the Housing Act of 1949 became a basis for much of the subsequent economic and community development programs.

**Economic/Community Development History**

In the 1940s and 1950s the predominant approach to community development took a *tabula rasa* approach. Starting with Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, the solution to the problem of slums and blight was thought to be physically removing slums and blight. Title I of the Housing Act of
1949 recommended the physical destruction and removal of deteriorating buildings to make room for new development, the theory being that the destruction of the slums would get rid of the environment that fostered the antisocial behavior associated with the inner cities and provide space for new development to attract the middle class (Carmon 1990). In 1954 the federal government changed the name of this program to Urban Renewal (Lang 2000b). Urban Renewal changed the face of urban development and opened the door for economic development policies on the local, state and national levels.

After the leveling of thousands of homes in city after city to make way for new middle income housing, the effects of urban renewal were not as desirable as initially hoped and the federal government looked to adapt existing policies and form new policies to address the growing social and economic problems facing cities. In 1966 President Lyndon B. Johnson, appalled by the social destruction and widespread poverty in the inner cities, developed the Model Cities Program as a means to address these problems and create a better living environment for the urban poor. “The program coordinated federal and local efforts to contain urban blight through urban renewal, central planning, and the development of entire new towns” (The Brookings Institute 2004).

Placed under the control of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Model Cities Program came online in 1968 with considerable funding from the Johnson Administration and Congress. “The program would enable the concentration of public resources, coordination of public resources, coordination of federal programs…focused on deteriorated central city neighborhoods” (Carmon 1990, 102). Prior to full enactment Congress authorized $900 million
for HUD as part of a pilot program in 66 cities. After being sufficiently pleased with the performance of the program in those 66 cities, full implementation continued and cities began to apply for available funds (Carmon 1990).

Community revitalization was at the heart of the Model Cities Program but increased federal oversight and lack of social and economic development programs doomed the effort. Cities applied for funds by submitting detailed plans for the development of their communities. These plans were reviewed for approval by a HUD panel. Unfortunately HUD also had an evaluation process for the Model Cities Program which emphasized immediate results, leading to a heavy reliance on physical development rather than the social and economic aspects that might have better served the communities (Carmon 1990). Model Cities was also top-heavy with bureaucracy and the program was not extended beyond its original five year funding period, making room for new approaches to local development (Redburn and Buss 1982) and ending the unsuccessful policy of urban renewal in 1974 (Grogan and Proscio 2000).

The New Federalist movement gained strength with Richard Nixon as president and the push for greater decision-making autonomy at the state and local levels was the next step. By letting the Model Cities Program expire in 1973, Nixon created a funding source for his solution to community development, the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. Under the CDBG program communities apply to HUD for funding for various local initiatives aimed at community and economic development; the funds can be used for just about any community development purpose as long as it fits HUD’s broad national agenda (Department of Housing and Urban Development 2004) and inherently strengthens the relationships between local
governments and local business. This independence allowed each city to approach development in a different way, resulting in various successes and failures across the country.

Three years later President Jimmy Carter established the Urban Development Action Grants (UDAG) program to supplement CDBG. In a study by the Brookings Institute and HUD it was found that CDBG was not meeting the economic development needs of the communities receiving grants (Redburn and Buss 2002) but that much of the CDBG money was going into housing and neighborhood improvements and little was going towards revitalization and large scale economic development efforts. With UDAG cities could use federal money to foster business in the community. The money could be used for various economic development measures that encouraged public/private cooperation, including luring business to the area, retaining existing businesses, or expanding existing business, further strengthening the informal linkages between local government and private business. In 1989, after years of varying success, the UDAG program was dissolved (Redburn and Buss 2002).

Throughout the 1980s the federal government took a back seat to community involvement and played the role of funder rather than facilitator. This was accomplished via three key methods: CDBGs and UDAGs, mentioned previously, and through the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street Project (National Conference of State Legislatures 1991). Under this program smaller cities coast-to-coast received generous funds for preserving their faded commercial districts. Monies received went to preservation and reconstruction, but significant amounts also went to business retention, development and support programs to stimulate “main street” economies (National Conference of State Legislatures 1991).
In the last twenty years one of the most popular approaches to neighborhood development has been the use of Enterprise Zones. Based on an idea developed by Margaret Thatcher’s government in the United Kingdom, Enterprise Zones were first proposed as possible federal legislation in 1980, but received little support and proposals never made it to a vote. More than a decade later, Jack Kemp, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, again brought up Enterprise Zones as a solution to inner city ills. In 1992, with the images of the Los Angeles riots fresh in their minds, members of Congress passed Kemp’s Enterprise Zone legislation but it was quickly vetoed by the first President Bush (Roberts and Sykes 2000, 260-261). Enterprise zone legislation came up again in 1993 with the full support of recently inaugurated President Bill Clinton. The Democrats, however, made very minor changes to the legislation, changed the name to Empowerment Zones, and passed legislation in August of 1993 authorizing Empowerment Zones (Roberts and Sykes 2000, 261).

Despite the federal government’s lack of interest in urban policies and programs during the 1980s state governments still had to address many of the problems facing their urban communities and they turned to Enterprise Zones. State governments across the country embraced the idea of Enterprise Zones and began implementing policy.

Financed through various state funding sources and federal grants and incentives, Enterprise Zones are geographical areas for targeted economic development. States designated specific areas in need of significant economic assistance and began to use various economic development tools for that area. Essentially the Enterprise Zones are areas with fewer government restrictions; regulating restraints on business are reduced with the supposed result being a closer
approximation to a true free market economy. Tools most commonly used include various tax incentives and abatements, an easing of labor laws, expediting of the permitting process, and cities often waive many land use and zoning regulations (Redburn and Buss 2002).

These efforts were aimed at saving communities by increasing competition locally, preventing various businesses from leaving and others from failing, and, more importantly, attracting outside business and investment, and encouraging new start-ups. Through these various incentives governments hoped to boost local economies in their areas which in turn would result in more jobs for the residents, more people coming to the community spending their money, and eventually more people moving back into the community. However, recent studies have shown that policy based purely on Enterprise Zones, incorporating little or no social elements, have been less successful than hoped. The most persistent argument against Enterprise Zones is that despite the outside investment that did occur in the designated areas, much of the new jobs have gone to people who do not reside in the zone, defeating the purpose of establishing the zones (Redburn and Buss 2002, National Conference of State Legislatures 1991).

In 1993, encouraged by Jack Kemp’s ideas for a federal Enterprise Zone program, Bill Clinton and the Democrats implemented their own version of Enterprise Zones, Empowerment Zones. Working in the same vein as Enterprise Zones, the Empowerment Zone program was an economic and community development stimulus plan aimed at “empowering” the local community and its residents. Enterprise Zones and Empowerment Zones differ in their focus: Enterprise Zones aim to boost investment and new business while Empowerment Zones match
many of the economic incentives but also incorporate elements of social programs to insure the targeted approach benefits the population it is meant to benefit (Roberts and Sykes 2000).

Empowerment Zone legislation tackles more than the economic problems facing distressed communities; it resembles something closer to a holistic approach to local development. Besides offering incentives for business location/relocation and the relaxing of government restrictions, Empowerment Zones address several of the criticisms of Enterprise Zones. First, Empowerment Zones provide grants that support job training programs, child care programs, home ownership and affordable housing programs, and numerous other community development tools. Second, businesses located in Empowerment Zones receive Employment Tax Credits for employing residents of the zone. Third, Empowerment Zone designation includes money for the physical rehabilitation of the area (Roberts and Sykes 2000, Redburn and Buss 2002, HUD 2004).

Empowerment Zones, community development block grants, and the selective use of Enterprise Zones have played major roles in community development over the last decade but success varies by location and the presence of any of these tools does not directly translate to successful redevelopment. One non-governmental asset in local neighborhood development has been the community development corporation (CDC). At work for a long time in cities across the country, these organizations have played major roles in rebuilding communities despite the sometimes misguided policies and programs of government. Only recently have cities begun to realize the critically important role these groups have on community revitalization and, as a result, CDCs are now recipients of a considerable amount of local economic and community development money (Grogan and Proscio 2000).
Some cities have been able to use these tools and techniques successfully for economic development and they stand as beacons of light in the neighborhood development world. At the same time, others cities have failed to take advantage of the same programs and have watched as portions of their urban cores have fallen deeper and deeper into despair. There is no ‘Rule of Thumb’ for successful implementation but there seems be a model of effective government and community participation that has helped steer neighborhoods in the right direction in many cities.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In order to pinpoint the causes for the thirty year delay in the development of Columbia Heights this paper uses the case study approach. The author uses the single case approach to analyze Washington, DC neighborhood development policy and practice with regards to the Columbia Heights neighborhood and focuses on the political economy and its forces on the redevelopment of Columbia Heights. The goal is to create an exploratory study of the District and Columbia Heights, and the development policy affecting each. In so doing, the author attempts to produce an explanatory analysis of the past thirty-six years, making inferences about events and policies that affected the neighborhood. This case will also look into what tools for development were used and if and/or why they failed to create the successes hoped for by local authorities.

The development of this case study has been based on multiple data sources. A majority of the research and evidence is derived from government documents; which provides a history of legislative and policy goals and agendas specific to Columbia Heights. All planning activities referenced were conducted by the National Capital Planning Commission prior to 1984 after which the DC planning office took over planning responsibilities (Steinbach 1998). National Capital Planning Commission documents including several plans for the District are available through various area libraries. Since 1984, when the DC planning office took over planning responsibilities documents related to the physical and economic development planning of the city have become sparse. These documents have been viewed in the DC government’s Legislative Services Division’s historic documents reading room. Additional library research has been done to better understand the historical context of some of the DC government’s decisions.

This research process consisted of six tasks:
Task I: The development of a question and identification of a problem – What has happened in Columbia Heights since 1968? What policies have been used since 1968 that have lead to changes, what policies have not? What has lead to the Columbia Heights redevelopment since the late 1990s?

Task II: Data Collection – Researching the history of development policies in DC, particularly those used in Columbia Heights and the political regimes that formed over the past 36 years. Identifying the actors, redevelopment officials, policy makers, and community officials using interviews, library research, and newspapers.

Task III: Field Work – Meetings with local development officials, evaluation of the neighborhood and the development that is currently occurring, and conducted research at libraries and archives holding data unavailable elsewhere.

Task IV: History of Events – A narrative history of economic and community development in DC and specifically Columbia Heights. This includes a discussion of the political economy and public-private linkages that formed regimes in the city and a description of the roles of the actors, redevelopment officials, policy makers, and community officials the roles they have played in the development of Columbia Heights.

Task V: Analysis – Reviewing the history of DC development, the political economy, and policy decisions made for the past 36 years, inferences about causes and events that altered the course of development in Columbia Heights. Key policy decisions and partnerships have been pinpointed for their affects, positive or negative, on the development in the neighborhood.

Task VI: Reflections – On the events in Columbia Heights and their impacts city-wide and vice versa.

The written case focuses on three points: a brief history of Columbia Heights, a history of economic development in Washington, DC and Columbia Heights, and a history of government and planning in the District that is the basis of the discussions of the political economy. An analysis is conducted linking the events in each of the three parts to development goals and their successes and failures.

A case study is not conducted without trepidation. Critics of case study methodology argue that, because of the qualitative and exploratory nature of the method, much of the results become
inadmissible, especially when trying to make inferential statements across study areas (Yin 1984). We believe this is a problem in this instance as the study is only trying to explain the situation in Washington, DC and Columbia Heights. Results are not used to generalize about other areas. Other reliability and validity concerns will be of little consequence as all the documents used and individuals spoken with are accessible to any individual. The links made between events and outcomes are supported by the data presented and are clearly justifiable.

The two major sources of information for analysis are the resources at the District of Columbia Public Libraries, Washingtonia Division, and the Washington Post newspaper. Government documents were hard to come by; a visit to the Washington, DC Office of Planning (where the candidate spoke with local planner Jill Diskin) yielded limited resources, and a conversation with the Washington, DC Department of Housing and Community Development revealed that they had lost their archives and admitted that the best source of District public documents is the public library. After nearly twenty hours of library research, all major resources in the library were covered.

The most vital information came from the Washington Post. A series of searches yielded hundreds of articles on topics relating to Columbia Heights, 14th street, the riots, community development and urban renewal in the District. This provided a narrative of the history of DC allowing for key moments in the history of the development of Columbia Heights. This narrative provided the backbone for analysis that helped determine the role of government and policy in Columbia Heights since 1968.
The final step was a trip to the neighborhood in February 2005 to conduct a sight analysis and determine the current level of development in the area and acquire GIS data.
CHAPTER 4: HISTORY, 1867 - 1974

In 1867, on a small farm just outside the city of Washington but within the District of Columbia,\(^1\) Stone Farm was subdivided for a new residential community (The Columbia Heights Citizen Association 1904, 6-7). Ideal for a new community, Stone Farm sat atop a series of bluffs adjacent to the City of Washington; developers named this new community Columbia Heights. Within twenty years Columbia Heights had become a neighborhood for the wealthy and white (Columbia Heights Citizen Association 1904) but by the turn of the century streetcars had reached into Columbia Heights and prosperous African Americans began to move in. As the African American population increased, whites began fleeing the neighborhood (Smith 1997, 33) and by the 1920s Columbia Heights was rapidly becoming part of Northwest Washington’s “Black District” (Fitzpatrick 1990, 49), an area that comprised the largest urban black community in the country (Smith 1997, 29).

By 1968 the 14th Street shopping district in Columbia Heights had become the most successful neighborhood shopping district in the city with an estimated $100 million in business a year (Washington Post 10/3/1971). This shopping district began growing in the late nineteenth century and by 1920 had become the second most important and prosperous shopping area in the city (Fitzpatrick 1990, 49). However, the prosperity of the shopping district did not necessarily mean prosperity for Columbia Heights. A majority of the buildings were owned by white businessmen who, in protest to losing their neighborhood to DC’s black community, refused upkeep on many of their buildings. As time went on this neglect spread to other areas of the

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\(^1\) In the creation of the national capital the Founders established two jurisdictions from land donated form Maryland and Virginia, the District of Columbia and the City of Washington. The City of Washington was designed by Pierre L’Enfant. The land outside of the City of Washington, mostly farm land, was part of the national capital but fell under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia.
neighborhood and housing quality in Columbia Heights began to diminish. By 1964 neighborhood decline seemed imminent and efforts, led by All Souls Church, soon began to try to address the current problems and prevent future problems (Perman 1964).

The Riots and the Aftermath: 1968 - 1971

The declining conditions in Columbia Heights had begun to frustrate residents and tensions between black residents and shopkeepers and white landlords began to rise. Residents released this tension in a torrent of violence on April 3, 1968. The next three days of riots left the neighborhood destroyed and smoldering. When the smoke cleared on April 7, 4000 homes and 270 of the 320 businesses along 14th Street (Map 3) had been destroyed and many of the businesses that were left did not reopen. Total damage estimates in 1968 exceeded $29 million (Washington Post 4/4/1998, Washington Post 4/7/1968). Two other neighborhoods in the city lay in ruins, H Street Northeast and 7th Street in Shaw. The riots took City officials by surprise because no one knew tensions had reached such a point in the city and the common thought had been that DC was riot proof. Since the neighborhood included such a large and successful black middle class, officials assumed all parties involved had too much to lose. Hindsight showed that the tensions were exceptionally high and that many rioters used the turmoil as a way to exact
some revenge on the whites of the city (Washington Post 4/4/1988). As the smoke cleared city
officials began to discuss how to rebuild these neighborhoods and residents began to clean up
and wonder where to go and what to do.

Shortly after the uprising ended, Mayor Walter E. Washington initiated the clean-up process with
considerable help from neighborhood community groups and local churches (Gilbert 1968). With
local residents demanding a say in their future, Mayor Washington created two groups to
guide the rebuilding in Columbia Heights, the Community Redevelopment Committee and the
Economic Development Committee. Each organization consisted of select community members
and was to work with the government to assist in the rebuilding of the neighborhood, physically
and economically, giving the neighbors the voice they demanded (Gilbert 1968). With increased
pressure from the federal government to develop a plan for the reconstruction of Columbia
Heights, Mayor Washington promised Congress a plan for the reconstruction of the
received a $600,000 grant from the Ford Foundation for the creation of the Community
Reconstruction and Development Corporation (RCD), a group designed to guide the

As August came and went there was little movement towards a plan for rebuilding Columbia
Heights; the City had yet to begin significant clearance or reconstruction in the neighborhood.
With any hope of rebuilding dwindling, those who could afford it moved elsewhere in the city,
leaving the poor and elderly in a neighborhood without employment opportunities (Washington

^2 RDC did not use any of the $600,000 on rebuilding efforts and instead spent it on salaries and out side contractors (Washington Post 4/3/1978). By the mid 1970s RDC was no longer a player in the rebuilding of Washington’s riot corridors.

As 1968 came to a close two of the three riot corridors in the city had seen significant cleanup, and rebuilding had begun. But in Columbia Heights no new construction had begun, a majority of the burnt out buildings remained standing, and liquor stores moved in and represented the only new business on 14\textsuperscript{th} (Washington Post 12/29/1968). Mayor Washington’s office stated only that the process of cleanup and rebuilding in Columbia Heights had been delayed because the City was still working on consensus building within the community. However, despite speaking of a completed plan for Columbia Heights, no citizens groups had seen one and very little community input had been solicited by the Mayor (Washington Post 12/29/1968). As a result of the government inaction many of the churches in the area began to form development organizations in an attempt to rebuild their communities, but District government refused a majority of their initial projects, citing failure to comply with the City’s plan for the neighborhood (Washington Post 12/29/1968).

In 1969, eleven days after his inauguration, President Richard Nixon toured Columbia Heights to see for himself the carnage left by the riots. What President Nixon saw made such an impact on him that he vowed to make rebuilding the city a key goal during his presidency and promised that no one would forget Columbia Heights (Washington Post 4/5/1971, Washington Post 4/5/1988). Despite President Nixon’s promises, one year after the riots no rebuilding had begun
in Columbia Heights. Only a few blocks south in Shaw, the city’s rebuilding effort was well underway. Shortly after the smoke cleared along H Street the city promised the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA), the City’s urban renewal and the planning agency for most of the non-federal portions of the District, upwards of $40 million for redevelopment efforts in Shaw (Todd 1986, 212). HUD opened the door for urban renewal funds to Columbia Heights by establishing 14th Street as an Urban Renewal Area (DHCD 1979b, 6-7).

Ego became a major factor in development within Columbia Heights. As it became apparent that community development organizations would play a considerable role in rebuilding, community groups began to vie for government dollars. City officials talked of wanting to partner with one of the neighborhood community groups to help direct the rebuilding effort along 14th, which led to long, drawn out battles between groups for City funds. The infighting between community groups, particularly MICCO and Change Inc, caused the deal with the City to fall through and the lead in the rebuilding reverted from the community groups to RDC (Washington Post 3/4/1969, Washington Post 4/3/1969). Because of the infighting, the City perceived Columbia Heights as lacking a cohesive voice and believed that the tension and fighting among various community groups would complicate the rebuilding process (Washington Post 5/4/1969).

As the summer came HUD began making plans of its own for Columbia Heights. Concerned about the housing situation in the neighborhood and the rising number of poor, HUD came up with a plan that followed its urban renewal policies (Washington Post 7/26/1969). By September 1969 HUD had created the 14th Street Urban Renewal Area Plan that centered on the construction of 2504 new residential units and the rehabilitation of hundreds more. This number
concerned some neighbors as a majority of this housing would be public housing and both HUD
and the City had developed a reputation for poor upkeep on publicly owned housing

In developing this plan, HUD was able to do something the City had failed to accomplish: it
managed to get three opposing community groups to agree on a composite project. Working
together with the three groups, HUD developed the new plan affecting 70,000 people in the 340-
acre Columbia Heights riot corridor. In addition to the nearly 3000 new and rehabbed housing
units, many of which would be in Pruitt-Igoe style high rises, HUD had planned a commercial
and shopping center expected to revitalize the neighborhood’s economy (Washington Post
12/10/1968). On December 17, 1969 the HUD plan was approved by city council, thus opening
the door for the first phase. HUD assured the District of $14 million for the initial phase, which
included purchasing sixteen parcels in Columbia Heights for construction of new apartments

1969 also brought in a new approach to community development for Washington. In the spring
of that year the City completed its application for participation in the newly formed Model Cities
Program. By August the City had been approved for participation and would be receiving $9.7
million for the first year of the program (Washington Post 5/18/1969, Washington Post
8/8/1969). Officials touted the new Model Cities money as a major tool in rebuilding the riot
corridors but, by law, federal money received under the program could be used only within the
designated Model Cities area, an area that included the neighborhoods of Shaw, Stanton Park,
Trinidad, and Ivy City (Model Cities Program 1972). Noticeably missing was Columbia
Heights. City officials based their selection of Model City Neighborhoods on assessments of those with greatest need in 1967. According to the 1967 statistics these neighborhoods were the poorest sections of the city and the sections with the highest levels of unemployment (Model Cities Program 1972). In 1967 Columbia Heights still was home to the second largest and second most profitable shopping district in the city and levels of poverty and unemployment did not approach the levels seen in the Model Cities neighborhoods. By 1969, however, all that had changed.

Optimism and hope filled the air in Columbia Heights on New Year’s Day 1970. Less than two weeks earlier the City had approved the first development plans for the area and $14 million had been promised to jump start the efforts immediately. However, six months later no government-sponsored projects were underway and none of the sixteen parcels for the HUD project had been purchased (Washington Post 7/26/1970). This lack of action opened a window of opportunity for RLA and allowed the group to establish itself as the leader of redevelopment in Columbia Heights. In August RLA marked thirty-six plots in Columbia Heights, with a total value of $2 million, that it would like to purchase to begin building a series of low to moderate-income housing units in the neighborhood (Washington Post 8/27/1970).

As fall approached, Columbia Heights residents began to demand answers from the city as to why it had not begun any projects in the neighborhood. The City had no answer. The neighborhood still bore the scars of the riots of two and half years before. Empty lots and burned out buildings, most still in the same condition they were in the day the riots ended, dominated the scenery. By the last week of September the neighborhood’s frustration had reached its limit and
for three consecutive nights residents began fighting with police and looting stores. In an effort to quell the unrest Mayor Washington walked 14th Street and spoke of the changes that were coming but by this time residents believed this was simply lip service and his departure sparked the worst night of unrest since the riots (Washington Post 9/25/1970a, Washington Post 9/25/1970b).

In March 1971 RLA began the process of razing 34 of the 61 abandoned and burnt-out building along 14th with an eventual goal of removing all 157 riot damaged, non-salvageable, buildings in Columbia Heights. This action came after endless pressure from Marion Barry, a militant civil rights activist and director of Pride Inc, a local job training and education organization. (Washington Post 2/20/1971, Washington Post 2/23/1971). A month later RLA made another important announcement; it chose a developer for the first new development on 14th Street. RLA selected Community Group Health Foundation Incorporated to build a $3 million four storey community health center to serve as an outpatient facility for approximately 20,000 people (Washington Post 4/24/1971).

Despite RLA’s taking the unofficial lead on the rebuilding effort, five groups were vying for control of the rebuilding: The National Capital Planning Commission, the Model Cities Commission, City Council, RLA, and the Reconstruction and Development Corporation. However, RLA was the only group of the five that had taken an active role thus far in the development. Unfortunately, as crime continued to plague the neighborhood and RLA’s progress slowed, citizens again decided to voice their opinions about the lack of development


In 1968 both the 7th Street and H Street riot corridors elected Project Area Committees (PACs) to act as the neighborhoods’ voice for the rebuilding effort. However, City officials did not organize a PAC for Columbia Heights until 1972. Since the post-riots development efforts in Columbia Heights had been slowed by the continued infighting between various community groups, the only solution seemed to be to elect a PAC to build consensus and represent the neighborhood as a unified voice (Washington Post 5/28/1972). In July 1972 Columbia Heights had its first PAC election and it was not without controversy. Losing candidates complained of voter fraud, claiming winning members used various methods of buying votes, the most common currency said to be food and alcohol (Washington Post 7/7/1972). With the PAC in place, RLA had an elected group of community members with which it could begin to plan the redevelopment of the neighborhood.

The first project up for PAC approval was RLA Project One, a 406-unit apartment building for moderate-income families at 14th and Columbia. The PAC members were split down the middle on the project and agreement was not reached for nearly a year (Washington Post 9/17/1972, Washington Post 9/6/1973). The PAC’s refusal to agree and the RLA’s continued inability to initiate development were magnified when, over one year later, construction on the $3 million Group Health clinic had yet to being despite promises (Washington Post 9/17/1972).
By 1972 the other riot corridors had seen considerable development thanks to Model Cities’ money. Two years in the Model Cities Program had resulted in the construction of seven childcare and education facilities, a job-training center, a new public health facility, a senior center, several libraries, a social service center, and a consumer information center. Model Cities monies also went to the creation of an economic development corporation, housing development corporation, and a housing code enforcement program that helped raise the quality of housing throughout all the Model Cities neighborhoods (Model Cities Program 1972).

Two years after promising to begin the process of razing buildings along 14th Street, RLA had yet to raze a single structure and 14th Street’s appearance had changed little in five years. One change that had become apparent along 14th was the new high intensity security lights and increased police patrols, marking the City’s first effort to halt rising crime (Washington Post 4/4/1973). The abandoned buildings and empty lots had become prime locations for criminals, drug dealers, and squatters and made Columbia Heights the most dangerous neighborhood in the city3.

By the fall of 1973 the Columbia Heights PAC had finally approved the RLA Project One and selected developers. Contingent on receiving federal money, RLA selected Midcity Developers, All Souls Church, and Canhe Incorporated to develop the 406-unit building at Columbia Road (Washington Post 9/6/1973). RLA also took steps towards implementing a 1969 plan for the old Riggs Bank building, purchasing it in the hope that it would serve as a catalyst for development around the 14th and Park area (Washington Post 12/1/1983).

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3 In both 1972 and 1973 Columbia Heights led the Washington, DC in total crime and led the city in each of the following categories: murders, assaults, burglaries, robberies (Washington Post 8/15/1978).
1973 also proved a historical one for the District. On Christmas Eve President Nixon signed into a law a bill granting the District home rule. Under the bill, DC would be governed by an elected mayor and thirteen council members, one from each of the eight wards and five at-large members. Non-partisan elections were set for November 1974, with the new city government taking control in a limited capacity in January 1975 (Washington Post 12/25/1973).
CHAPTER 5: REBUILDING, 1974 - TODAY

Hope of Development: 1974 - 1980

RLA’s Project One finally got a major boost in November 1974 when HUD approved a $29 million grant for construction of the 406 low-income units (Washington Post 11/16/1974). Expectations for this project were high. Project One had been on the RLA drawing board for two years and with full federal funding there appeared to be no reason to continue to delay this project. With home rule approaching, the city government began to reorganize to better help struggling communities and to address the problems of the city’s poor. This reorganization resulted in the creation of the DC Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). This new agency took over many of the responsibilities HUD had been overseeing while Project One was under federal control and absorbed RLA’s Community development element, leaving the physical development to RLA. It also took over some of the aspects of neighborhood planning for which the National Capital Planning Commission had been responsible (Washington Post 12/27/1974, Washington Post 12/27/1975).

November 5, 1974 saw the first District elections in the twentieth century and signaled the unofficial beginning of home rule, an event only two months away. On that day voters elected Walter E. Washington mayor and thirteen others, including local activist Marion Barry, council members. This election legitimized Washington’s tenure as an appointed mayor and allowed for some stability as the city transitioned. On January 2, 1975 home rule officially began, giving the City unprecedented powers, including the ability to levy taxes, regulate financial institutions, and reorganize the government (Washington Post 11/6/1974).
In the seven years since the riots, the federal government had spent $150 million, $111 million of that in low interest loans, in the three riot corridors and only Shaw/H Street had experienced any major rebuilding; by 1975, ground had not yet been broken on a single building in Columbia Heights (Washington Post 5/13/1975). Thus far City programs aimed at rebuilding the three riot torn neighborhoods had failed. Money from the District housing down payment assistance program had been funneled to other city programs and many of the District housing programs were never implemented (Washington Post 9/12/1975). The District government had developed a history of inaction. By 1975, the District had spent only $500,000 of the $33.3 million available on the housing programs for which it was allocated (Washington Post 9/12/1975).

1975 also marked the first year of District participation in the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program. With the federal allotment, DHCD set up twenty-three programs to support DHCD’s short and long term strategic plans that focused on improving housing options, opportunities, and quality of life throughout the city (DHCD 1979a, 27). Renters in the District paid a disproportional amount of their income on rent; thirty seven percent of DC renters paid in excess of twenty-five percent of their income on housing and over 65,000 needed some form of residential assistance (DHCD 1979a, 12, 15).

After one year of operation, DHCD lacked a clear policy vision and had helped the City become the largest owner of substandard housing in the District. Existing policy, which prohibited housing inspection, the conversion of apartments to condos, and offered tenants first refusal when landlords sold, encouraged abandonment and discouraged regular maintenance (Washington Post 12/27/1975). In an effort to open 14th Street and Columbia Heights to CDBG
money, DHCD removed the Renewal Area tag and designated the 14th Street corridor a Community Development Area (DHCD 1979b, 6-7), and with encouragement from DHCD the District finally approved the Group Health clinic on 14th Street, opening the door for construction to begin (Washington Post 8/15/1976).

In the winter of 1976, the US General Accounting Office, after a study of RLA and the DC renewal effort, released a highly critical report citing bureaucratic mismanagement and lethargy. Poor record keeping had resulted in RLA’s losing track of what properties it owned, what had been acquired and from whom, how much had been paid and how much was still owed, and who had been relocated and to where (Washington Post 2/14/1976). Despite this criticism, RLA continued its efforts to rebuild Columbia Heights and in August broke ground on Project One (Washington Post 8/15/1976).

With the first project underway in Columbia Heights, the first major employer relocated to the neighborhood; C and P Telephone took a risk, trusted the PAC, and moved into a building on 14th. C and P then partnered with the Columbia Heights PAC in an effort to recruit other employers to the area. This became a major selling point in the PAC plan for the neighborhood which also included a new fire station and a large shopping center that would return the neighborhood to its former status as a shopping destination4 (Washington Post 11/30/1977).

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4 The riots robbed Columbia Heights of consumer services. Once a shopping destination second only to Downtown, it lost so much of its businesses that residents had to travel to Maryland or downtown for even essential services such as a grocery or drug store (Washington Post 5/9/1992).
Ten years after the riots only three properties had been developed in Columbia Heights: Columbia Heights Village, formally RLA Project One, and two rehabs of abandoned apartment buildings done by HUD. Despite the ten years and millions of dollars spent, the City had yet to find any private investor willing to take a risk on Columbia Heights. The City’s inability to spur any growth over ten years fueled neighborhood frustration but signs of a turn-around appeared to be surfacing (Washington Post 4/3/1978).

In April of 1978, RLA began to pinpoint parcels of land in Columbia Heights that would be of interest to developers. Prime land centered on the corner of 14th and Irving, home of the proposed Green Line Metro stop. A block north of this corner sat the historic Tivoli Theatre, an old Vaudeville era theater that RLA hoped could be a second center for development in the neighborhood (Washington Post 4/3/1978, Washington Post 11/7/1978). With RLA beginning to make plans for the Tivoli location and increased CDBG money available, DHCD identified nineteen buildings containing forty-four apartments for rehabilitation - a $1.5 million investment in the community (Washington Post 6/1/1978). DHCD saw the land at the corner of 14th and Park, including the Tivoli Theatre property, as a prime location for a mixed-use housing, shopping, and an office complex. As DHCD was
attempting to develop a plan for this site, the Park Central Development Corporation proposed a $115 million project for the same 11.5 acre site (Map 4) (Washington Post 11/7/1978).

In November 1978, after a come-from-behind victory in the primary in which he beat incumbent Walter Washington, former militant activist and two-time city council member Marion Barry won the mayor’s race in a landslide that drew broad support from both whites and blacks. Barry’s race was won on a platform of housing reform, crime reduction, education and health care improvements. His win brought with it optimism that he might be able to improve the neighborhoods that had seen little change since the riots (Washington Post 11/8/1978).

When Marion Barry took office, DHCD rated housing conditions in Columbia Heights as poor to very poor and designated it a priority housing area. Additionally, the level of poverty in the neighborhood was among the highest in the city with a majority of the residents receiving some sort of government assistance (DHCD 1979b, 12). Since the riots, the only development to occur in Columbia Heights by 1979 had been government sponsored residential development. Starting in 1977, HUD, RLA, and DHCD completed 478 units of new housing and rehabbed an additional 315 units. These new apartment buildings were the only structures to replace the burnt-out buildings that lined 14th (DHCD 1979b, 6-7). Unfortunately, by 1979 a line had been drawn between 14th Street and the remaining portions of Columbia Heights and the City had used ten CDBG-funded programs within the 14th Street Community Development Area and no funds has been spent elsewhere in the neighborhood (DHCD 1979b, 15).
As a last ditch effort to make a lasting impression on the redevelopment of Columbia Heights before leaving office, Mayor Washington submitted a proposal to the Department of Transportation for the development of the 12 acres of RLA owned land along 14th between Park and Irving around the proposed Columbia Heights Metro stop. Washington proposed a comprehensive plan for the area to be developed by Park Central Development that would include office, retail, housing, and parking (Washington Post 1/4/1979).

1979 also saw the release of DCHD’s first housing survey that showed much needed to be addressed. Turnover in the DC rental market had reached its lowest level in years by the late 1970s leaving few housing options for low- and moderate-income individuals. As a result of the rental shortage, the public housing waiting list in the District reached 10,000. Newly appointed DHCD director Robert Moore hoped to make drastic changes to the District housing policy that would remedy the situation within an optimistic four years (Washington Post 1/21/1979). Moore first tackled the District’s Rehabilitation Loan Program that provided District residents low interest loans for restoration or rehabilitation of dilapidated and/or historic buildings. Money for the program came from CBDG funds and was intended to help low-income residents, but middle-income individuals began to take advantage of loop holes and as a result were receiving a majority of the funds. Moore reworked the program so that preference would be given to low-income families in an effort to raise housing quality rather than to middle-income individuals attempting to maximize an investment (Washington Post 4/13/1979). With low interest loans now more accessible to low-income families, Moore hoped a housing boom would soon follow (Washington Post 8/4/1979).
As 1979 came to an end, the City announced a proposed development along 14th that would include 2 million square feet of retail and office space and up to 900 housing units and had begun the search for potential developers (Washington Post 11/22/1979). However, any hope of private development seemed at risk again. The crime that had plagued the neighborhood in the early 1970s and had been declining faster in Columbia Heights than anywhere else in the city began to rise again, thanks to a booming heroin industry. In response to the increased drug trade and a February 11, 1980 killing of a DC police officer, Mayor Barry announced his “War on Heroin,” a program that drew sharp criticism from numerous DC civil rights groups. District activists found it hypocritical that a mayor who had once led the “Free DC Movement,” a movement that fought against the abuse of police powers, had instituted a program that used random arrests, excessive force, and intimidation and scare tactics in an effort to curb the drug trade along 14th Street (Washington Post 2/28/1980). This use of force that Marion Barry had once fought against in Columbia Heights and now employed, combined with a continued negligence to address the needs of the neighborhood, resulted in the community’s alimentation from him and led citizens to claim that Mayor Barry had failed them (Washington Post 5/17/1980).

The Marion Barry Years: 1980 - 1990

Watch-dog groups began to question the behavior of the Barry administration when, in 1981, it became known that forty percent of the buildings bought by the city between 1979 and 1981 had been owned by Theodore R. Hagans Jr., former chairman of Mayor Barry’s inaugural committee. DHCD went so far as to alter the boundaries of the 14th Street Community Development Area so that the city could buy one of Hagans’ properties. Robert Moore cited coincidence when asked why the City seemed to be favoring one property owner who had such close ties to the administration (Washington Post 3/12/1981).
By 1981 RLA had finally determined what to do with the twelve acres around the proposed Columbia Heights Metro stop. City officials signed an agreement with local businessman Herbert Haft and the Park Central Development Corporation to proceed with the $115 million project proposed in 1978. This proposal included the destruction of the historic Tivoli Theatre to make way for a Safeway supermarket, offices, retail, residential development, and parking (Washington Post 11/23/1996).

The 1970s closed with great optimism about the potential for Columbia Heights. Crime was down, property values had begun to rise steadily, the City seemed to be working with local developers on various projects throughout the neighborhood. But by 1982, crime in and around 14th was again on the rise and the poor rental market led to falling property rates and a growing concern among District residents that money spent on Columbia Heights equaled wasted money (Washington Post 1/21/1982). Speculators who had bought in Columbia Heights and inexperienced landlords hoping to profit from the growth of the neighborhood took the hardest hit. As a result of the poor market, many of the new landlords and speculators in Columbia Heights neglected their properties because they had become money pits. This neglect led to a deterioration of the buildings and Columbia Heights rapidly became the largest slum in Washington (Washington Post 2/22/1982).

In an effort to spur more investment in Columbia Heights and reverse the regression of the early eighties, Aetna Life and Casualty gave $2 million to Washington Inner-city Self Help (WISH), a local nonprofit specializing in community building that was also highly critical of the Barry
administration’s housing policies, to begin a loan program for projects in Columbia Heights (Washington Post 1/21/1982, Washington Post 7/2/1982). After more than a year after receiving the $2 million, WISH had not disbursed any funds. The available money, earmarked for renovation and rehabilitation, did not seem to be enough incentive for local developers or enterprising individuals to invest in the neighborhood. There was just too much perceived risk (Washington Post 10/6/1983).

By the end of 1983, RLA had broken ground on the renovation of the Riggs Bank building bought in 1973. Still working off the 1969 plan, the Riggs Bank marked the first renovation of a commercial structure in Columbia Heights since the riots. This renovation, costing an estimated $9.6 million, included first floor commercial space and two to three floors of residential space catering to handicapped and low income individuals (Washington Post 12/1/1983).

The concerns over District housing policy that had been drawing so much criticism since the late 1970s still seemed to affect the city in 1984. Strict rent control laws, the inability to convert apartments to condos, and the tenants first right of refusal law, combined with the poor rental market that had until this point characterized the city, encouraged landlords to neglect their property. As a result, the number of abandoned buildings city-wide was steadily increasing (Washington Post 8/7/1984).

By 1987 Columbia Heights had become a collection of new apartment buildings and boarded-up buildings, with the abandoned buildings significantly outnumbering new and renovated buildings. With the Metro stop at 14th and Irving slated to open in the early 1990s, property
owners in Columbia Heights decided that their most profitable option was to stop investing in their buildings, let them fall into disrepair, and wait to sell them for considerable profit when the Metro station opened (Washington Post 7/25/1987).

Twenty years removed from the riots, District government began to praise the work done in Columbia Heights and spoke of its rejuvenation. However, to any individual who drove down the street, the situation in Columbia Heights remained relatively unchanged aside from the few new apartment buildings (Washington Post 4/4/1988, Washington Post 4/5/1988, Washington Post 4/7/1978). District policies up to that time had failed to stimulate the development expected city-wide.

Washington, DC had, by 1988, suffered two decades of population loss that had created two DCs, one for the rich and white, and another for the poor and black. This growing gap between rich and poor, combined with a decreasing tax base as middle-income residents continued to migrate to the suburbs of Maryland and Virginia, caused Marion Barry to alter District policy to increase the tax base and create a more business-friendly environment, hoping to attract more employers (Washington Post 4/4/1988, Washington Post 4/7/1988).

Simultaneously, development in Columbia Heights had thus far been supported either by the city and federal government, or by local churches; no private development had occurred in the area. The government could no longer afford to bear the brunt of rebuilding costs and needed to find a way to off-load some of the cost and initiate private investment. Mayor Barry found a way; he
changed the city’s redevelopment policies from community development oriented policies to economic development policies (Washington Post 4/4/1988).

Early in 1988, Mayor Barry announced the creation of “DC on the Grow,” the city’s new economic development program. Based on the trickle-down theory popularized under President Reagan, “DC on the Grow” provided incentives to wealthy businessmen to invest in poor, predominantly black, neighborhoods. The theory was that if enough people invested in the neighborhood the wealth would then trickle down to the poor members of the community (Washington Post 4/4/1988). Based on initial efforts, the switch to “DC on the Grow” looked positive. The District began to offer city-owned land to developers at discounted prices hoping that would spur development. City Council also began to pressure area banks to make loans available to residents of the riot corridors. However, these efforts still did not have the initial effect the City hoped (Washington Post 4/7/1988).

Seasoned developers were still skeptical of the Columbia Heights market and identified two large hurdles that made development difficult, whether a market existed in the neighborhood or not: 1) Unpredictable government behavior - District government had developed a habit of delaying projects and approvals in each of the riot corridors, and 2) Squabbling community groups - every community group in Columbia Heights perceived its agenda as superior to any other and refused to allow any development to occur without a community consensus. To combat these problems, the city began to partner with community groups, local banks and young developers eager to exploit an untapped market in an effort to bring new vision into the redevelopment projects. This approach required any developer who built in Columbia Heights to
partner with a community group to help guide the process and to act as a liaison between the community and the developer. This step marked a huge change in community group behavior in Columbia Heights. Groups that often fought with each other, but more often fought any plan the city intended, begun to come together to implement change in the neighborhood (Washington Post 4/7/1988). A final economic development strategy was announced in the summer of 1988 with the creation of Mayor Barry’s “Blue Ribbon Committee for the Promotion of the Arts and Economic Development.” This program intended to use many of the District’s cultural amenities as sources of economic development. The committee identified priority areas within the city to act as centers of arts and entertainment, including Tivoli Theater and 14th Street. As a result, the City developed a plan for the Tivoli site that included a large entertainment and retail complex that would serve the entire city and become the economic and social hub of the neighborhood (Washington Post 7/24/1988).

1988 ended in some controversy. On December 22, Mayor Barry skipped two meetings, a photo-op with needy children at a toy drop and, an evening meeting with community leaders from Columbia Heights. This highlighted a series of missed meetings and punctuality concerns that had begun to characterize Barry’s schedule. Barry’s December 22nd meetings where missed because the mayor was tied up in an unscheduled meeting in the hotel room of Charles Lewis, a man who for many years had been under FBI surveillance as a suspected drug dealer (Washington Post 1/11/1989). In this instance Barry managed to avoid too much controversy.

However, Barry’s chosen company and behavior caught up with him on January 18, 1990 when he was arrested on drug charges after an evening with prostitutes and cocaine. His arrest marked
the end of a tumultuous decade that saw his ex-wife accused of stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars from the federal government and low-income families in Columbia Heights, dozens of mid- and senior-level officials in his administration jailed on criminal fraud charges, and his friendship with Karen Johnson, a convicted drug dealer, criticized publicly (*Washington Post* 1/19/1990). Supporters of Barry claimed he was innocent and that the arrest was a politically or racially motivated. However, the FBI had been investigating the mayor since 1982, the year his friendship with Karen Johnson began. The surveillance increased only when he began associating with Charles Lewis (*Washington Post* 2/3/1990).

That spring brought good news for Columbia Heights. In March, the federal government approved $2 billion for the completion of the Metro’s Greenline. This funding allowed for the linking of the Fort Totten station and U Street Metro stops. Previously, there had been a considerable gap in Greenline service but with these new funds two additional stops would finally be realized: Petworth and Columbia Heights (*Washington Post* 3/29/1990). Around this same time, the city made funds available for the clean up of Meridian Hill Park. The only green space in Columbia Heights, Meridian Hill Park had become a gathering place for prostitutes and drug dealers, an area most knew to avoid. But with the clean up underway residents began to see progress (*Washington Post* 4/16/1990). The year ended with the election of a new mayor. As a result of Marion Barry’s arrest and subsequent jail term, a new mayoral election was held in conjunction with the November city council election. Sharon Pratt Dixon became the third mayor since the reinstatement of home rule (*Washington Post* 11/7/1990).^5^

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^5^ On October 26, 1990 Marion Barry was sentenced to a six month jail term related to his arrest on cocaine possession. Under DC law, elected officials can retain office after a conviction of a misdemeanor but not a felony. As result of his conviction, Barry forfeited his mayor position but ran for an at-large council position in 1990 which he did not win (*Washington Post* 10/27/1990, Washington 11/7/1990).
Memories of 1968 returned in 1991 when in Mount Pleasant, the neighborhood west and northwest of Columbia Heights, an unarmed man was shot multiple times and killed by police. Tempers flared as word of the killing spread and the residents of Mount Pleasant rioted. These riots spilled into Columbia Heights, reminding long-time residents about what had happened twenty-three years earlier and reminded developers that the Columbia Heights area was still quite volatile (Washington Post 5/9/1992, Washington Post 9/18/2002).

Twenty-four years after the riots, community groups and the city began making strides in the redevelopment of Columbia Heights. The Development Corporation of Columbia Heights (DCCH) played the role of leader in the development. By 1992, former DHCD director Robert Moore had been hired as president of DCCH and was using his contacts to extend DCCH’s reach in the community. DCCH’s largest project in 1992, the renovation of the Columbia Heights Cooperative apartments, combined several funding sources including DHCD’s Home Purchase Program, a program that gave incentives to developers to build affordable housing that allowed low-income individuals an opportunity to own, and money from area banks and utility companies. At the same time All Souls Church was in the planning stages for a series of town houses to be built on Girard Street, and City of Hope, another Columbia Heights based CDC, was in the process of renovating twenty-six apartments with money from DC’s Office of Human Services (Washington Post 4/25/1992).

Cuts in the DC Home Purchase Program were announced in 1992. Under the existing funding levels, DHCD used $2.8 million on 268 units. For 1993 the city cut the funding in half to $1.4
million, seriously hurting a program that many saw as making a significant difference in the poorest sections of the District (Washington Post 4/25/1992). These cuts drew heavy criticism from community activists who reminded Mayor Kelley\(^6\) she had made the redevelopment of Columbia Heights, and other decaying neighborhoods, a priority; however, two years into her term little had been done. Seemingly spurred by this criticism, DHCD and RLA announced that development in Columbia Heights would soon begin. In fact, DCHD and RLA had developers lined up for the development of 57 ownership units at 14\(^{th}\) and Belmont, 30,000 square feet of office and retail on Euclid, and 14,000 square feet of office space on 14\(^{th}\) (Washington Post 5/9/1992).

In 1993 twenty-three of the District’s largest corporations announced the creation of the Community Development Support Collaborative that would work with the ten poorest communities in the city. Using $2.5 million of pooled money, the group planned to work in Anacostia, Columbia Heights, the H Street Corridor, Marshall Heights, Mount Pleasant, North Capital Street, Shaw, Southwest, and Near Southeast, rebuilding communities and improving the quality of life in each neighborhood (Washington Post 7/1/1993).

The same month the city broke ground on the Nehemiah Project, 61 units of affordable housing and the first new retail project to begin in Columbia Heights, developed by area CDCs on four parcels of City-owned land. Touted as a key to the development of Columbia Heights, the project was praised by Mayor Kelly and the developers who claimed that this project would be the stimulus the neighborhood needed. Despite this praise, many of the neighbors protested the

development when they learned that the project would include neither a drug store nor grocery store, the two services the area has been without since the riots (Washington Post 8/5/1993).

Space within the Nehemiah project was made available to any business, but the project had incentives for neighborhood businesses, giving them priority placement and reduced rent for the first five years. Despite the eagerness to contract with local businesses, many area residents feared that there were no controls in place to guarantee that business would be local and would hire Columbia Heights residents, especially since recent consultants reported that only two percent of the income earned in Columbia Heights stayed in Columbia Heights (Washington Post 10/7/1993).

In 1994, after a brief stint out of District politics and six months in jail, Marion Barry began his comeback. Barry took aim at Sharon Pratt Kelly and the office of Mayor and won (Washington Post 11/9/1994). 1994 also saw the implementation of President Clinton’s Empowerment Zone legislation in DC. This legislation designated the entirety of DC as an Empowerment Zone, creating a vast array of economic development opportunities for the District (DHCD 1998).

With the DC economy booming, the Greater Washington Board of Trade (GWBT) began attempting to open the larger regional market to small inner-city businesses. Their new initiative identified small businesses in struggling neighborhoods that offered products and services that would be of value to larger businesses in the region. GWBT and local CDCs initiated a pilot program in Columbia Heights that established a small business resource center in the neighborhood to assist local business owners with the marketing and sales of their products and

In 1981, Herbert Haft and Park Central Development received five parcels of RLA land around the proposed Columbia Heights Metro station at 14th and Irving, including the historic Tivoli Theatre property, for the development of a regional entertainment and shopping complex. However, fifteen years removed from the signing of that agreement construction had not yet begun. This highlighted a trend of RLA development agreements involving City-owned land that had gone undeveloped. Haft and Park Central blamed the lack of development of their five Columbia Heights parcels on a court battle over the preservation of the Tivoli Theatre; however, this court battle only affected one of the five parcels (*Washington Post* 11/23/1996).

The City and RLA had been following the same development plan for the riot corridors since the early 1970s and the lack of accomplishment forced the Department of Housing and Community Development to review city-wide redevelopment efforts. As a result of this review the City released a new consolidated plan (*Washington Post* 11/23/1996, DHCD 1996).

The 1996 DHCD Consolidated Plan labeled priority areas for increased attention. At the top of this list sat Columbia Heights and the 14th Street shopping district. Using City-owned land as sites for anchor retail, DCHD hoped to revive the neighborhood and stimulate investment in the urban retail market and provide increased funding to local CDCs. In an effort to build on this goal, the plan expanded the Community Development Areas, created during the switch to CDBGs, to include more economic development initiatives. Key to the economic goals under
the Consolidated Plan was the implementation of the Enterprise Community Initiative (DHCD 1996).

The Enterprise initiative focused on using City-owned land in priority neighborhoods as the city’s most important economic development tool. Under this initiative, the City would acquire additional properties, increase its direct low-interest loans to businesses, and begin intensive infrastructure improvements. Keeping with these goals, the initiative created two new City programs, the Construction Assistance Program and the Urban Renewal and Community Development Property Management Program. The Urban Renewal and Community Development Property Management Program provided money for the maintenance of DCHD and RLA owned land in target neighborhoods in an effort to keep them attractive to potential developers. Under the Construction Assistance Program, the City would conduct the site prep work for any new construction in target areas (DHCD 1996).

Concerned about the lack of private investment in Columbia Heights and the impractical and ineffective plan for the area the City had been following since 1970, DHCD and the DC planning office held a planning charette to develop a new plan for the neighborhood. The old RLA plan centered on publicly financed housing and private investment; the city would bulldoze vacant buildings, build public housing and hope that the collection of empty lots and public housing would stimulate private investment. However, with no private investment in Columbia Heights since the riots, it had become apparent that the RLA plan needed to be revised. So with 300 residents in attendance the development of a new plan began (Washington Post 4/4/1998, Washington Post 3/27/1999).
Thirty years after the riots, Columbia Heights CDCs had begun a massive building boom that resulted in five major projects underway in the neighborhood. The Nehemiah Projects started the building boom in 1996, and spawned four residential projects by three other CDCs: Manna Incorporated, WISH, and DCCH. Local CDCs hoped that the increased intensity in building would show private developers that Columbia Heights could support new development and had become a perfectly viable market. With this increased emphasis on private development in Columbia Heights, the City began accepting proposals on the seven parcels of city-owned land, formerly promised to Herbert Haft and Park Central (Washington Post 4/4/1998), surrounding the Metro stop, which was scheduled to open in 1999.

The Barry administration’s growing debt had become such a concern by 1996 that the federal government became concerned with the financial conditions of the city. In 1995, the District’s budget deficit approached $770 million and the debate over the success of home rule began. Home rule gave the City the responsibilities of a state but none of the revenue tools that states use to raise funds. Mayor Barry had spread the City’s resources too thinly and was forced to request a $267 million grant to cover overspending in Medicare/Medicaid (Washington Post 2/3/1995). The future was bleak and, in 1996, Congress began discussions to consider stripping the administration of a majority of the powers granted in 1975 (Washington Post 7/31/1997).

By July 1997, Congress had agreed to remove a majority of the DC government’s power for a period of at least four years and an appointed control board7 would work to restore District

7 In 1995 amid concerns of the District going bankrupt Congress appointed a control board to manage the cities finances and attempt to pull it out of fiscal emergency (Washington Post 8/6/1997).
financial and managerial independence. The Control Board had previously been given control of the police department, and after hiring hundreds of additional officers, helping lower the crime rate, they would now be expected to produce the same results for every aspect of city government (Washington Post 7/31/1997). The federal government plan included a $1 billion aid package and took control of the nine agencies, including emergency services, public works, DHCD, the planning department, and the schools, leaving minor departments under Mayor Barry’s control (Edwards 1997). When President Clinton signed the District rescue package into law, it put Control Board Chairman Andrew F. Brimmer in charge of the city. The law allowed Brimmer to completely rework the employment structure of each of the nine agencies under his control (Washington Post 8/6/1997).

1998 also signaled the end of an era. With his approval ratings at an all-time low, Barry was challenged for the mayor’s office by a Harvard-educated technocrat from the financial world. On November 7, Anthony Williams became the fourth mayor of DC since the reinstitution of home rule (Washington Post 11/8/1998).

By the early 1980’s, the federal government had taken note of the fiscal problems the city was facing and, in an effort to make the city more responsible, stipulated the need for a comprehensive plan by 1985. The original comprehensive plan for the District of Columbia was completed by this deadline and since then has been modified and amended multiple times, most recently in 1999 (DC Office of Planning, 2004). In its current form, the plan tackles just about every aspect of the community: environmental concerns, brownfields, housing needs, land use
planning, economic development, urban design elements, traffic planning, and neighborhood planning.

The primary goal of the 1999 version of the DC comprehensive plan is to make DC an “economically viable city,” and find a way to increase the tax base. No single section of the plan specifically states this purpose, but as an underlying goal, it permeates the entire plan. The most significant aspect of the plan lays out goals that directly relate to bringing in more revenue without raising taxes; this requires reversing the trend of out-migration and increasing new business relocation within the District (DC Office of Planning, 2004).

Washington’s economic development goals, as stipulated in the 1999 Comprehensive Plan: Economic Development Element, focus on building a stronger network of neighborhood business centers outside of the Central Employment Area, strengthening the Central Employment Area, and changing its character from strictly commercial to a more mixed-use development area, revitalizing old business areas and brownfields, educating the labor force, and, finally, boosting the tax base.

To oversee the entire process, the plan requires the creation of the National Capital Revitalization Corporation (NCRC), a public/private organization which absorbed RLA and is intended to enhance development, increase job opportunities, and invest and/or encourage development in designated high need/high priority areas. Furthermore, the NCRC and the DC government must market the city as a desirable business location with particular emphasis on the
sectors in which a competitive advantage exists: business and finance, hospitality and tourism, media and publications, information technology, and education and research (NCRC, 2001).

A central theme running through the economic development plan is the concentration of business around Metrorail stops. This has a twofold purpose; it provides a neighborhood hub and encourages Metro ridership, boosting the heavily subsidized rail system. To encourage development around Metrorail stops, a plan to stimulate private growth has been formulated. The key to this plan is a restructuring of the current system so that a support structure for private growth is created. This structure includes an expansion of debt capital and equity, an effort to increase small business loans and promote non-traditional business opportunities. As a result of this financial support structure, neighborhood development organizations will continue to gain greater independence, enabling them to determine the path of their neighborhood.

The results of the 1997 charrette to rework the RLA plan became public in 1999 in the form of the “Community Based Plan for Columbia Heights” (Image 1). This plan was to be the guiding document for the City-owned land around the Columbia Heights Metro stop. This was the first plan for the area to involve the City government and residents from throughout the District, and the plan took a dual center approach.
With a dumbbell shape, the plan had a commercial center at 14th and Irving at the opening to the Metro and one block north, centered on the Tivoli Theatre, a cultural center would emerge; apartment buildings would line 14th linking these two nodes. Neighbors, concerned over neighborhood character, had building codes worked into the plan in an effort to ensure that new development would be consistent with the scale and character of the neighborhood (Washington Post 3/27/1999).

On May 20, 1999, RLA voted on developers for the Columbia Heights plan properties. RLA had to choose from four proposals for the parcels with a minimum investment of approximately $135 million (Washington Post 4/1/1999, Washington Post 5/20/1999). RLA selected two proposals for the properties, an $18 million project on the Tivoli Theatre property and a $131 million project on the four other parcels. The Tivoli project, Tivoli Square, proposed by local developers Horning Brothers, included preservation of the façade of the historic theater, a 49,000 square foot Giant supermarket, 39,000 square feet of retail space, and twenty-nine town homes. The other project, proposed by Grid Properties, DC USA, involved the construction of a 650,000 square foot dining, entertainment, and retail complex (See Map 4). The DC government expected that these projects, the largest to be built outside the downtown area, would generate an estimated 1300 jobs for the city (Washington Post 9/10/1999).

The selection of Grid Properties and Horning Brothers for the development of the Columbia Heights properties did not come without criticism. One of the rejected proposals, a proposal by Forest City Enterprises, mirrored the plan developed at the 1997 charrette. The Forest City plan included a cultural center based on the conversion of the preserved Tivoli Theatre into a new

Coincidentally, the winning proposals both partnered with DCCH, one of the most heavily City-funded CDCs. This revelation fueled the complaints that the RLA decisions were influenced by City contacts and drew numerous comparisons to City behavior during the Barry administration (*Washington Post* 9/16/1999, *Washington Post* 9/18/1999, *Washington Post* 9/23/1999). Hoping to avoid defending its actions, RLA tried to remain silent during the accusations but the comparisons to behavior during the Barry administration forced RLA to defend its decision (*Washington Post* 9/23/1999). This fight became more intense with the opening of the Greenline Metro stop on September 19, 1999 which many expected would drive the success of the new development (*Washington Post* 1/19/1999).

This prolonged battle over the Columbia Heights development and continued accusations frustrated Mayor Williams and obliged him to take action. He hired a mediator to broker peace and announced the creation of a new public planning process. Despite these promises and apologies by the City, Columbia Heights residents could no longer trust the City. After all, the City had yet to follow through with any of its projects and promises in over thirty years (*Washington Post* 11/6/1999). The fighting and uncertainty that began to surround the project generated so much bad press that Giant felt the negative press would affect them and threatened to pull out of the project, which would have effectively killed the Horning Brothers portion of the development (*Washington Post* 12/8/1999).
In response to the Giant announcement, Washington city council rushed to rectify the situation and appease all parties. After enacting emergency legislation that would have required the mayor to sign off on any development proposal, the final proposals were passed with strict regulations (Washington Post 12/8/1999, Washington Post 12/17/1999). This emergency legislation required developers to submit a complete proposal with a development summary and proof of financing within 90 days and construction had to begin within two years; if the developers failed on either of these stipulations, the land would revert back to the City (Washington Post 12/12/1999). The mayor and city council approved the proposals but the new stipulations did not please preservationists who were still fighting the destruction of the neighborhood’s historic theater. Because of the fear of continued courtroom challenges by preservationists, the City reorganized the Tivoli Square proposal, combining it with an adjacent City owned parcel, that would allow the Giant to be moved and the theater saved (Washington Post 12/24/1999).

*Columbia Heights in the 21st Century: 2000 - Present*

After its formation in 2000, the National Capital Revitalization Corporation quickly began to establish itself as a successful development corporation. The 2001 *Revitalization Plan of the National Capital Revitalization Corporation* created an “Agenda for Action” that laid down the path for rejuvenating the capital. Under this plan, the role of NCRC is to remove blighted areas, grow current businesses and recruit new businesses throughout the city. The NCRC’s primary role in this development is that of facilitator. As the semi-private face of the DC government, NCRC assembles any and all takers in an effort to form new partnerships that encourage growth.
and investment throughout the District, especially in priority development areas. These priority development areas include all Enterprise Zones, designated neighborhoods, and all areas within 1500 feet of a transit stop (Metrobus or Metrorail) (NCRC, 2001).

In its charter the NCRC was given the money and the power to direct much of these redevelopment efforts. In addition to an initial grant of $25 million, Fannie Mae has committed $75 million to facilitate business funding (NCRC, 2001). Additionally, NCRC has the authority to assemble and redevelop land as its finances allow, provide debt equity and tax exempt bond funding, expedite regulatory approvals (local and federal), and exercise eminent domain (NCRC, 2002).

In early 2001, a DC audit showed the grants and loans to District CDCs often went unspent or when spent, were spent inappropriately. Despite this trend DHCD continued to administer grants to CDCs including those mentioned as frequent violators in the audit (Washington Post 2/14/2001). A further look showed problems with the entire system. Since 1992, two hundred buildings and projects received funding from the City and only seventy had been completed ten years later. The City had not yet developed a system to monitor CDC spending of City funds and to track which CDCs received City money; DHCD could only account for one third of the development contracts it had signed. CDCs were equally to blame. A majority of District CDCs could not account for City funds and when fund allocation was shown, much of the spending violated the District’s conflict of interest rule by contracting with friends and board members for developments (Washington Post 2/24/2002). At the center of this controversy sat DCCH. Since 1992, DCCH has received millions for the development and restoration of 106 units. Of these
106 units forty-six remained untouched despite DHCD contributions in excess of $3 million. In addition to unspent funds, DCCH was allowed, by DHCD, to sell the only two single family homes it had restored at market rate to an investment group despite District law that required DCCH to make the buildings available to low-income families (Washington Post 4/18/2002).

In 2002, the Office of Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development solidified NCRC’s push for neighborhood centers with the creation of reSTORE DC, a government initiative to attract diverse retail to priority areas within the city. With the City fully committed, NCRC has been able to more aggressively to pursue its goals. Additionally, in 2003, the mayor’s office created the Neighborhood 10 initiative, a list of ten strategies for strengthening District neighborhoods. These steps, many of which had already been incorporated into NCRC’s plans for Washington, are the building blocks for neighborhood revitalization, both economic and social. The key steps for economic development under Neighborhood 10 (2003) included additional money for reSTORE DC, elimination of blight, heavy investment in priority areas, and emphasizing transit nodes as neighborhood business centers.

Each year the City adds new neighborhoods to the priority area list, but for the purpose of this study the focus will be on those neighborhoods of highest priority. The five highest priority areas, as listed in the comprehensive plan, are not necessarily the areas in most need, but are areas that have been designated by the City, Neighborhood 10, and NCRC as the areas that, when improved, will create the most immediate impact city-wide upon completion. These five areas are Colombia Heights, Georgia Avenue, the Anacostia River area, the Southwest
Waterfront, and the Shaw/New York Avenue area (Rivlin, 2003). Each neighborhood has strengths and weaknesses that determine its development path.

By 2002, in response to the delinquent development agreements signed by local developers, and the increasing numbers of vacant buildings dotting the landscape, Mayor Williams announced a property acquisition program. First, the City identified various vacant and dilapidated buildings in five different neighborhoods, including Columbia Heights, to purchase and sell to developers at discounted prices for conversion to low-income housing. Property owners were offered fair market value for their buildings and if they refused, the City took steps to condemn and retake control of the buildings (Washington Post 1/16/2002). Next the mayor took aim at CDCs that had failed to fulfill their development deals with the City. Announcing that the CDCs that had not yet begun construction on City-donated land were in breach of contract, Mayor Williams began reclaiming the land and threatened to cut funding to CDCs with the most delinquent properties (Washington Post 2/26/2002).

Private developers began to invest in Columbia Heights by 2002. Thirty-four years after the riots, six private developments, adding 528 apartments, shops and cafes, two day care centers, a dance studio, and underground parking, were under construction on five City-owned parcels. The Dance Institute of Washington started on four studios, a daycare center and outdoor playground on 14th between Monroe and Newton Donatelli and Klein, a local development group, began two developments: 1) a 200 unit apartment building with forty units reserved for low-income residents, a first floor reserved for retail, and 166 underground parking spaces at 12th and Irving and, 2) a 225 unit apartment building, again with forty affordable units and first
floor retail, and an additional 222 underground parking spots also at 14th and Irving. At 14th and Girard the Community Development Corporation of Washington and Mission First Capital broke ground on a fifty-six unit apartment building that included first floor retail, a daycare center, and seventy underground parking spots. Triangle II, another DC developer, acquired a parcel on Chapin Street for a thirty unit building, with half the units reserved for affordable housing; and on Euclid they began a twenty-two unit build with eleven affordable units (Washington Post 4/25/2002).

Two years after being approved for development, Grid Properties had yet to break ground on its DC USA project and officials had become weary of the plan, fearing that lack of a major anchor tenant could doom the project (Washington Post 2/24/2002). However, by September 2002
Grid Properties announced a partnership with Target Stores making it the anchor tenant for DC USA, easing the minds of District officials. Grid Properties also eased the minds of those critical of its partnership with DCCH by giving it an outreach role rather than making the CDC a partner in the actual development process (*Washington Post* 9/18/2002). Just a year after the announcement of the partnership with Target, DC USA had a list of tentative tenants including Whole Foods grocer and Bed Bath and Beyond, both of which signed agreements with the developers (*Washington Post* 9/4/2003).

Eleven projects (Image 2) were either underway or proposed and cranes were dotting the Columbia Heights skyline. Grid Properties’ DC USA and Horning Brothers Tivoli Square project, which had more than doubled in cost, jumping from a proposed $18 million to $37.5 million, and would include a completely restored theater for the GALA Hispanic Theater, anchored the new development. Other projects, all a mix of commercial and residential space, include Columbia Heights Plaza, a $25 million 147 unit apartment building with first floor restaurants and retail, Columbia Heights Station, a $35 million mixed use building with 235 apartments, the Greater Washington Urban League headquarters, a $5.3 million renovation of a former funeral home, and The Heights of Columbia, the fifty-six unit condominium development by the Community Development Corporation of Washington and Mission First Capital (*Washington Post* 9/4/2003). The first of these projects, the Greater Washington Urban League headquarters, opened in December 2004 (*Washington Post* 12/16/2004).
CHAPTER 6: ANALYSIS

The following are the key moments in the District that contributed to the events we see in Columbia Heights today. Some events began to contribute and failed, others never got off the ground because of City issues, but all have had some role in either what is seen in the neighborhood today or why development failed to occur over the past thirty-seven years.

1900: Streetcars reach Columbia Heights

Prior to the streetcar expansion into Columbia Heights in 1900, the neighborhood had experienced a considerable amount of growth and the expansion of the electric streetcars\(^8\) past Boundary Street (modern day Florida Avenue) to the intersection of 14\(^{th}\) Street and Irving caused a population surge in the neighborhood. In the three years prior to the expansion of the streetcar, developers built nine apartment buildings along 14\(^{th}\) Street in anticipation of the future growth (Washington Post 12/16/1898).

The 1900 Census showed that the population of the District of Columbia grew by 48,326, half of which was outside of the city boundary. The existing city was relatively built-up and vacancy rates were low, meaning that new residents would need to look outside the city boundary for housing. Two neighborhoods absorbed the majority of this growth, Washington Heights and Columbia Heights. Census experts estimated that these two neighborhoods absorbed an estimated 4,000 new residents per year from 1890 to 1900 (Washington Post 7/13/1900).

\(^8\) The 14\(^{th}\) Street corridor was served by horse drawn streetcars until 1898 when the city began electrifying lines outside the City of Washington.
Only thirty years after the formation of the neighborhood, population density in Columbia Heights was approaching that of the City. By 1902 the residents of Columbia Heights had begun to overcrowd the exiting streetcar line along 14th Street, forcing the city to investigate installing a new line along 11th Street that would also serve Columbia Heights (Washington Post 4/11/1902). These new residents and increased population forced development north and spawned new, denser development in areas north of the neighborhood.

By 1918 the population of Columbia Heights was increasing faster than any other portion of the city. Many residents considered the neighborhood a city to itself, providing every amenity downtown could offer (Washington Post 5/5/1918). The 1900 population of 23,928 more than doubled to 49,067 by 1910 and 95,978 by 1920. This growth led to increased apartment development and a flood of new businesses along 14th Street (Washington Post 4/6/1920).

1920: The Race Issue

By the 1920s, drawn by Columbia Height’s new housing stock and economic opportunity, the District’s wealthier black residents began to migrate out of Shaw to the south and the Howard University area to the east into Columbia Heights. The neighborhood had become a well-established residential and business center with eighteen churches, nine schools, three fire houses, two banks, a telephone exchange, a post office, three theaters, a power station, a library, two lumber yards and 190 apartment buildings (Washington Post 5/13/1928). The growth seen in Columbia Heights had the neighborhood on a path to surpass the downtown as the most impart business center in the city (Washington Post 3/26/1924).
The white residents of Columbia Heights felt a considerable amount of pride for what they had created and the slow-growing number of wealthy blacks moving to the neighborhood scared the residents. This fear led, in 1926, to the neighborhood adopting covenants forbidding the sale of property to non-whites; however, this did not apply to rental housing (*Washington Post* 6/8/1926). The rental market was open to all who could afford it and if landlords were willing to open their doors to minorities, minorities moved in.

As the number of black residents slowly increased, whites who could began slowly leaving. This cycle continued until, by degrees, Columbia Heights became an all-black neighborhood and part of Washington’s “Black District,” a population that comprised the largest urban black population in the nation (Fitzpatrick 1990). However, the convent excluding black property owners still remained in place, leaving a majority of the black residents and business owners as renters.

This exodus of white residents did not coincide with a growth in property ownership by blacks and, as a result, many of the residential properties and most of the commercial space continued to be owned by white businessmen. Demand for low-cost housing began to increase as density rose in the neighborhood and property owners began subdividing town homes into small apartments often leaving inhabitants with roughly 200 square feet of living space (*Washington Post* 2/9/1952). This trend towards subdividing town homes increased density in a neighborhood already near capacity and contributed to the downturn the neighborhood was already experiencing (Perman 1964). This decline had begun to take its toll on the neighborhood and racial tensions driven by the tense tenant-landlord relationships became apparent.
1968, April 3: MLK shot, riots begin

With the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 3, 1968 the tension brewing in Columbia Heights over the last decade exploded into fiery violence. After three days of rioting 4,000 homes and 270 businesses, mostly black-owned, along 14th Street had been destroyed (Washington Post 4/7/1968). These riots left scars on the neighborhood that are still visible today and continue to shape views of the neighborhood. The riots gave the City and neighborhood ample reasons to rebuild and address many of the problems of decay that had begun to occurred during previous decades but, instead, the area was ignored and became a wasteland and the most violent and crime-ridden neighborhood in DC. The remaining tension and lack of rebuilding effort saw a majority of the black middle class in Columbia Heights and most of the businesses that remained on 14th street leave for opportunities in safer suburban communities.

Richard Nixon’s tour of riot-torn Columbia Heights in January 1969 and promise to make the rebuilding effort a key part of his presidency, engendered optimism in the neighborhood. Shortly after the president’s visit, HUD created the 14th Street Urban Renewal Area that was supposed to make funneling HUD money to Columbia Heights easier. Urban renewal still dominated the redevelopment practice outside of Model Cities areas at the time, and with this HUD money, City officials hoped to clear the destroyed and burnt-out buildings and initiate a massive rebuilding project. By September 1969 there seemed to be positive effect of the new renewal area when HUD Released the 14th Street Urban Renewal Area Plan that called for the construction of 2,500 new residential units.
1970, July: RLA takes lead on development

After it became apparent that the HUD plan was going nowhere, that community development organizations were becoming more interested in their own agendas than the neighborhood’s needs, and that the Reconstruction and Development Corporation was not going to take any initiative, the City’s urban renewal body, the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA), took the lead on rebuilding Columbia Heights.

RLA Chairman John J. Gunther realized there had been a significant lack of development in Columbia Heights. As the city’s urban renewal agency chairman, Gunther not only had the authority to enter the redevelopment picture in the neighborhood but RLA was, for years, the only group willing to put forth any effort to rebuild in Columbia Heights after the riots. The first steps RLA took in the redevelopment of the neighborhood focused on removal of blighted buildings and the identification of ideal plots for development.

It took several years for Gunther and RLA to wade through the confusion and disorder left behind by HUD and the District’s own redevelopment groups. By 1972 RLA was ready to begin building what would be the first new housing development in Columbia Heights since the riots: RLA Project One. Unfortunately, the Priority Area Committee (PAC) for Columbia Heights refused to accept the plans for the project.

By the fall of 1973, RLA’s Project One had been approved and developers selected. As Project One was being approved, RLA was working towards a second project, the renovation of the Riggs Bank Building. By 1974, Project One had received the funding it needed, by 1976
construction had begun, and in 1978 Project One became the only new construction in Columbia Heights.

Long before the DC government decided to use District-owned land as an economic development tool, RLA began pinpointing parcels in Columbia Heights that could be used to entice private development in the neighborhood. RLA identified twelve parcels along 14th Street between Irving and Park, as ideal site for private developers. These plots today contain the largest series of developments in the District outside of downtown and include DC USA and the Tivoli Square projects under construction around the new Metro stop.

Despite numerous controversies, RLA has contributed to more development in Columbia Heights than any other group. The largest developments in the neighborhood all began with RLA money or on RLA property. They partnered with the DC Department of Housing and Community Development to build thousands of residential units and are responsible for enticing private developers to build on RLA property. RLA is still active in District development and has continued to play a major role in the redevelopment of Columbia Heights since its inclusion into the National Capital Revitalization Corporation.

**1972, July: PAC elected**

The Columbia Heights PAC allowed the neighborhood to play an active role in the redevelopment decisions of the neighborhood. Unfortunately, this group initially slowed development. The PAC refused to allow funded projects to begin if they did not benefit committee members. Self-interest still drove the actions in Columbia Heights and the PAC
single-handedly delayed by two years the most important development in the first decade after the riots by two years. PAC Chairman Eugene Williams refused to approve RLA Project One because the agency had approached the community directly rather than through the PAC through him. By not communicating directly with him, Williams claimed the RLA had failed in its obligation to the neighborhood and, therefore, refused to approve RLA project (Washington Post 10/15/1973). By the 1980s the PAC had lost all credibility in Columbia Heights by contributing to the negative impression developers had of the neighborhood and no longer plays any role in the redevelopment of Columbia Heights. In retrospect it is clear that the PAC delayed multiple projects and refused to allow others to get off the ground and, therefore stifled progress that might otherwise have been made in Columbia Heights during the 1970s.

1973, December 24: Richard Nixon gives home rule to The District

With the signing of the Home Rule bill the residents of District of Columbia were to have a voice in their governance for the first time in over a hundred years. Home rule enabled elected officials to direct City funds into areas the City deemed necessary, with little to no federal oversight. Home Rule allowed the city to function in a manner similar to a state and dictate its own future, implement its own policies to shape the capital. The establishment of Home Rule allowed the City to establish its own agencies to direct economic and community development, opened the door to additional funding opportunities for neighborhood projects, and through elected leadership, provided a voice for communities in City Hall.
1974: DHCD formed

In response to the switch to home rule, the City had to develop its own departments and agencies. The first was the Department of Housing and Community Development. Starting with the onset of home rule in 1975, DHCD played a major role in the redevelopment of the city as a whole and in Columbia Heights. In conjunction with RLA\(^9\), which relinquished some of its community development duties to DHCD, it built or rehabbed nearly 800 residential units in Columbia Heights in its first four years as a department of City Government.

Today DHCD administers all of the City’s CDBG money and manages all housing issues for the City. This means that the department still plays a major role in the development of Columbia Heights. Low interest loans are still readily available for residents to rehabilitate their properties and DCCH still receives a significant amount of funds from the City for its efforts in Columbia Heights.

In 1996 DCHD developed its Consolidated Plan that labeled key priority areas in the city for focused use of CDBG monies. The essential element of this plan was the creation of the Enterprise Community Initiative. Under this initiative the priority areas, open to increased CDBG money, would also be areas where City-owned land would be used as an economic development tool. In an effort to attract new private development the City conducted site prep work in designated areas in an effort to lessen developers’ the up-front costs. This lowered the costs for developers and created an environment in Columbia Heights where the cost of

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\(^9\) RLA and DHCD worked together on several projects and worked in the same neighborhoods simultaneously but functioned as two independent agencies. RLA focused on land development while DHCD used it resources to improve communities by improving and building housing and championing housing equality in the Districts disadvantaged neighborhoods.
development had been decreased enough that the risk of developing reached an acceptable level. There can be little doubt that this has had a very stimulating effect on development in Columbia Heights and represents one way that local governments can have a positive impact on the development climate in faded neighborhoods.

1978, November: Marion Barry elected mayor

The election of Marion Barry as Mayor of Washington, DC changed the city permanently. Starting with the intimidation tactics of his “War on Heroin” Barry slowly began to alienate Columbia Heights and the redevelopment of the neighborhood diminished importance as an item on the agenda of District government. What development did occur in Columbia Heights often occurred as a result of Barry’s helping friends profit from the neighborhood. The most obvious instance of this came when Barry had DHCD alter the boundaries of the 14th Street Community Development Area so that the city could use CDBG money to buy the building belonging to his friend, Theodore R. Hagans Jr..

Barry’s unwillingness to alter District housing policy also took its toll on Columbia Heights. During the late 1970s, optimism that Columbia Heights was about to experience a building boom had been building, but antiquated housing policies and a poor rental market resulted in increasing numbers of abandoned buildings in Columbia Heights by the 1980s. By 1988, Barry finally decided policy changes needed to occur in order to alter the direction in which the District and Columbia Heights were going. His new policy (DC on the Grow) followed the trickle-down theory that became prominent under the Reagan Administration and he also began promoting
amenity-based economic development policies with his Blue Ribbon Committee on Art and Economic Development.

Barry made one key change to District Policy that changed the approach to development in Columbia Heights: he switched from a policy of community development to economic development, thereby significantly changing how redevelopment in Columbia Heights would be approached. DC on the Grow led to the City partnering with energetic young developers with limited experience to develop parcels in the city’s poorest neighborhoods. The results of this policy encouraged the creation of the Community Development Support Collaborative and the Greater Washington Board of Trade’s inner-city initiative.

Barry’s personal life also took its toll on the city. A considerable number of Barry’s personal contacts were questioned. His ex-wife was accused of stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars from the low-income residents of Columbia Heights; he began associating with known drug dealers. In 1990, he found himself in jail on cocaine charges. By 1996, it was so clear that the Barry Administration had ineffectively managed the City’s finances that the federal government had to bail the city out and take control of most of the City’s departments including DHCD and the Office of Planning. Under federal control, these two departments which had been very active in the redevelopment efforts in Columbia had funding cut, a move that dramatically weakened their ability to be active in Columbia Heights.

The impact of the Barry Administration lasted long after Barry left office. His four years out of office in the early 1990s did little to curb the culture of corruption that had developed over the
previous ten years. Mayor Kelly was not able to purge the city of former Barry cronies and, when Barry defeated Kelly in 1994, the political environment built by Barry was still firmly in place. This environment benefited friends of the administration, local business men, and Barry himself. Real development to benefit the city came last. The failures of the Barry Administration’s policies and practices had come to light by 1996 when the federal government came to the rescue of the city.

1990 – 1999: Department of Transportation approves $2 billion for completion of Green Line

With the completion of the Green Line of the Washington Metro, anticipated for years, the land around 14th and Irving became coveted by developers. This land happened to be RLA-owned land, meaning the City could choose what to do with the land in order to maximize the benefit to the neighborhood. This is now the location of DC USA and Tivoli Square and nearly nine other developments currently under construction that have fueled a building boom in Columbia Heights.

DC USA (Map 4) is perhaps the most ambitious project occurring in Columbia Heights. The plans call for a 540,000 square foot retail and entertainment complex at the Columbia Heights Metro stop. This project is to act as a catalyst neighborhood development by drawing residents from across the city to the site. Construction has already provided 700 jobs for the city and upon completion the complex will provide an estimated 1,600 retail jobs. The City is actively working to recruit retail giants Starbucks and Pier 1 to locate in the center and already has signed the Target Corporation to open its first store in the District. This development is also aimed at
growing local business and has designated 15,000 square feet of space for local entrepreneurial enterprises (Development Center of Columbia Heights, 2004).

The Tivoli Theater project is equally significant, though on a smaller scale, and also includes a residential component. At the heart of this project are the renovation of the historic theater and the construction of a mixed-use development to act as a neighborhood center. Besides the theater renovation, the key component of the development is the construction of a 55,000 square foot grocery store and the construction of an unspecified number of condominiums, of which twenty percent will be set aside for low-income residents. Another significant aspect of this development is the agreement the City and the incoming firms have made: the DC Department of Employment Services has reached a “First Source” agreement with the incoming firms which gives local residents first priority on the roughly 180 retail jobs that are expected to be created (Development Center of Columbia Heights, 2004).

1993: Nehemiah Project begins

The Nehemiah Project’s (Map 5) ground breaking and subsequent completion demonstrated to private developers that residential and retail projects could thrive in Columbia Heights. The project showed that there was a vast untouched consumer base in the area and a larger base of potential employees. Following the completion of the project in 1996, energy to develop Columbia Heights hit levels it had not seen since the influx of population after the street cars expanded into the neighborhood. Private development have now surrounds the areas around the project along 14th Street up to the location of the Metro. Private developers realized that
Columbia Heights has an underserved and underemployed population that could be tapped, and have spawned numerous developments in the southern end of the neighborhood (Image 3).

Map 5. Nehemiah Project

Source: DConCD
1999: Comprehensive Plan

The 1999 Comprehensive Plan, created by the DC office of Planning, for the first time showed that the District was serious about neighborhood development. By making neighborhood business districts key development areas and trying to focus commercial and high-density housing around transit stops, the City hoped to direct development and create multiple commercial centers throughout the city. Thus far the development in Columbia Heights has followed this plan and created a corridor of development adjacent to the Metro stop that includes hundreds of new apartments, hundreds of thousands of square feet of retail space, and cultural amenities. As a result of the comprehensive plan reSTORE DC (formed in 2002) and Neighborhood 10 (formed in 2003) were created to funnel considerable funding into neighborhood business districts and continue to encourage development in priority areas and around transit stops. To encourage and direct the new development occurring throughout the city, the 1999 Comprehensive Plan created the National Capital Revitalization Corporation (NCRC). NCRC absorbed RLA and with a $75 million grant began playing a very active role in the development of the city.

With the implementation of the 1999 Comprehensive Plan the City has been given direction and has thus far followed that path with great success. The economic development component of the plan stresses the importance of neighborhood cores and the need to further develop these cores. To accomplish this, the plan provided the funds to create the National Capital Revitalization Corporation which was to direct much of the revitalization and economic development initiatives across the city. Starting with particular priority areas, NCRC has been able to generate a considerable amount of growth across the city and is only just beginning. Though this plan is
still relatively young, the City’s commitment to its recommendations and NCRC’s aggressive development policies are helping change the city rapidly.

In neighborhoods across the city, development has been exploding as a result of the plan and NCRC’s work. DC USA and Tivoli Square have received significant help from NCRC. Four other priority areas have seen significant redevelopment as a result of the NCRC and the 1999 plan: Shaw, Georgia Avenue, Anacostia, and the Southwest Waterfront.

**Image 3.** Nehemiah Project and surrounding development

Source. DC Office of Planning
CHAPTER 7: FINDINGS

This paper set out to answer certain key questions: Why was development in Columbia Heights nonexistent for thirty years? Who was to blame? Why has development now begun in the neighborhood? To better understand the situation surrounding Columbia Heights over the last forty years, one must look at both city-wide factors and neighborhood-level factors to determine what has made Columbia Heights’ situation unique.

Actions and lack of action by government at the city level cannot fully explain why Columbia Heights experienced no rebuilding in the years immediately following the riots. It seems that the lack of experience in self-governance at the outset of home rule created a climate that slowed development. However, the effects of this were not limited to Columbia Heights and, in fact, other riot-scared areas experienced at least some recovery during the 1970s and 1980s. But there can be no doubt that District-level decisions compounded and perpetuated the lack of development in Columbia Heights over the next twenty-five years.

Home rule found a District without a history and culture of self-governance. There were checks in place to prevent government corruption and newly formed departments and agencies had a steep learning curve and their inefficiencies held back redevelopment efforts city-wide. Still in its infancy in 1975, the new administration was not prepared to address the needs of the city, including the ability to develop plans for the city’s communities. This lack of community planning meant all neighborhoods in the city suffered. City officials were ill-equipped to enter

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10 The first comprehensive plan for the District under home rule was not complete until 1984 and much of that plan was never implemented. It was not until the mid to late 1990s that the city was able to put together plans that could begin to be implemented.
communities, address issues with confidence, secure consensus, and provide a development plan for communities.

With practice and time, city government in the District began to understand its responsibilities. With this understanding came changes that allowed for a healthier system and greater development throughout the city. New approaches for handling city land, adopting community plans, and increasing community engagement all contributed to the improved governance of DC, and in turn, improved its development environment.

Along the way, however, the Department of Housing and Community Development’s policies encouraged the abandonment and/or neglect of unprofitable properties leading to a decrease in the number of rental units, an increase in the number of abandoned buildings, and a bloated waiting list for subsidized housing. Lack of housing significantly affected all areas of the city. As a result, by the 1980s, the city was in the midst of an affordable housing crisis and nothing being getting done to alleviate the crisis.

City policies perpetuated neighborhood stagnation by providing only limited incentives for developers to return to struggling communities add to the housing stock. Demand was low for real estate in Columbia Heights and existing incentives were not enough to encourage large-scale development. Throughout the 1990s, demand slowly began to increase and incentives began to entice developers to the neighborhood. Policy changes finally addressed the issue of housing city-wide in the late 1990s, as the City began a push to increase population and reestablish a large population base within the city. As a result, Columbia Heights is today seeing a building
boom of market rate, luxury apartment buildings. Most of the new buildings have incorporated affordable housing units to keep a healthy mix of incomes, but the character of the neighborhood is changing as gentrification begins.

While city-wide factors had a profound effect on the density of Columbia Heights, the lack of development after the riots must be explained by neighborhood-level factors as well. First, there were simply too many development agencies responsible for rebuilding the neighborhood after the riots. Second, there was an initial lack of community engagement and consensus within the community that prevented agreement on how to rebuild. In Columbia Heights, two additional factors played roles in the stagnation; the neighborhood’s notorious crime rate, and speculative real estate investors. It would be impossible to over estimate how much these two factors held back development.

Five players, the Economic Development Committee, Community Redevelopment Committee, Community Redevelopment and Construction Corporation, HUD, and the National Capital Planning Commission, vied for the lead role in the development of Columbia Heights. The result was fragmented community support and stagnation in the redevelopment efforts immediately following the riots. Lack of a redevelopment plan was blamed on developers and planners due to insufficient community engagement. Each group was trying to build community consensus and foster grassroots initiatives; however, these competing groups actually contributed to the fragmentation community consensus, assuring community-wide disagreement and no redevelopment.
The competition that developed among the five opposing groups created confusion in the neighborhood and stifled development at a time when the neighborhood was in desperate straits. Instead of competing for community support, each group could have presented residents with a range of proposals providing options for rebuilding, or the five could have formed a partnership to rebuild.

Lack of community consensus delayed the redevelopment in Columbia Heights for years. The two other riot corridors elected priority area committees immediately after the riots, and were quickly absorbed into the Model Cities movement which provided a single goal for the communities. The PACs gave these other communities a voice, while in Columbia Heights every church and community organization fought for its ideas.

Without the predetermined path laid out by the Model Cities Program, Columbia Heights was left to determine its own destiny. It was only later that the neighborhood was finally provided the opportunity to elect a PAC that would act as a unified voice in support or defiance of development proposals for the community. This finally provided developers with a single group with which to work to build community consensus and several developments were soon underway.

The City took its most effective step to solicit community input when it conducted the 1996 charette in Columbia Heights. With that input from community residents, the City was able to direct development, particularly surrounding the Metro station, in accordance with neighborhood opinion.
High, even notorious, crime rates impeded the potential development in Columbia Heights for years. As violent crime increased and drug dealers preyed on neighborhood residents, those who could leave, left, leaving only the poorest and neediest. The persistence of crime in Columbia Heights kept away developers and new residents, and as long as crime remained a problem, developers and new residents stayed away. As crime rates dropped as a result of increased crime prevention in the late 1980s, residents slowly began to return.

Prospecting and speculative land owners contributed to the lack of development in Columbia Heights. Combined with policies that encouraged neglect of buildings and abandonment, prospectors helped fuel the growing number of abandoned buildings. Columbia Heights was in desperate need of improvements to its housing stock. The city took steps to encourage development in all neighborhoods by offering City-owned land at deeply discounted prices, but developers who saw a future opportunity in Columbia Heights too often acquired these properties for speculative purposes only.

With the construction of the Columbia Heights Metro station assured, speculators knew that the opening of the station would cause neighboring land values to rise, so they held onto their investment for future sale, with no incentive to make improvements. The opportunity to sell the land at increased prices in the future provided the best return; developers bought the City land with no intention to build. It was not until 1996, when the City began to require owners, who had bought land under various development agreements, to build, or face reclamation of their land. As a result of this single policy change, prospecting has ceased and eleven projects, adding
hundreds of apartments and tens of thousands of square feet of commercial and retail space to Columbia Heights, are underway or awaiting approval.

The impetus behind much of this change today is the same one that changed Columbia Heights from a quite rural suburb into a bustling urban center - public transportation. Just as the arrival of the street cars helped turn 14th Street into a major commercial center in the 1920s, the Metro has facilitated the transformation of the open land around 14th and Park and 14th and Irving into DC USA and Tivoli Square. The local economy in Columbia Heights has yet to match the growth seen in the real estate market, but the completion of much of the commercial and retail development in the neighborhood will produce thousands of jobs, and the City is optimistic that 14th Street will again become a retail center essential to the District.

It is easy to attribute the recent changes in Columbia Heights solely to the Metro, but many events of the past played a role in the development we are seeing in the neighborhood today. As the community again began to attract residents in the early 1990s, other changes slowly began to occur. It became apparent that Columbia Heights could be a viable neighborhood for new development and, with encouragement from the City to develop, investors began to realize that in spite of the risks, there was considerable potential. The improved access to the neighborhood brought by the Metro stop has definitely contributed to development, but the metro stop alone would not have produced the development seen today. It took changes in city development policies, and, no doubt, a change in resident perceptions to bring about the new era of development we see in Columbia Heights today.
There are two ways to understand what has happened in Columbia Heights: that the events that prevented its redevelopment in the 1970s and early 1980s have been a blessing in disguise, or that these same events were a tragedy for residents, and the City did a disservice to the neighborhood by not contributing or even impeding its redevelopment over these long years. If one takes the ‘blessing in disguise’ stance, the lack of development over thirty years and the numerous vacant lots and empty buildings provided a clean slate from which developers could work. This has given Columbia Heights an advantage over other areas of the city at this dawn of the twenty-first century. The large expanses of land, especially that around the Metro stop, have allowed developers to undertake large scale, multi-use developments unlike any other in the District.

Taking the other view, that the City did a disservice to the community, we can only observe the development which is finally happening is long over due, and has come at the expense of thousands of residents over generations. From this point of view, the city did not meet even its minimum obligations to its citizens. Allowing a once prominent neighborhood to remain in a state of devastation for so many years was egregious and even tragic. It also raises trouble questions about the District’s priorities. Surely the city could have done more to address the needs of this community, especially in terms of combating crime and providing employment opportunities.

We can conclude that both city-wide and neighborhood-level factors contributed to the stagnation of development in Columbia Heights over the past thirty-five years. City-wide policies that discouraged investment and created housing problems affected all areas of the city,
as did government inexperience, ineptitude, and corruption. These had devastating effects on Columbia Heights, as they did on many DC Neighborhoods. But it is the events at the neighborhood level that failed to create initial development and made Columbia Heights a unique case. The failure of the initial five development organizations to cooperate and begin rebuilding, and the rival community groups that could not create a unified voice, prevented any initial development from occurring. The neighborhood declined into the most dangerous and crime-ridden neighborhood in the city. This, in turn, created an environment too risky for new residents or developers, perpetuating the cycle of decline in Columbia Heights. It took nearly thirty years for the right culture changes to occur at the neighborhood level and the right policy changes to occur within city government for investing in Columbia Heights to become attractive once again.

For Columbia Heights it has been a very long, and often sad, journey since the riots of 1968 but it is clear that this once proud neighborhood is finally recovering and may have a bright future. Much remains to be done and the neighborhood and government of the District will, undoubtedly, have to face the usual dilemmas of urban redevelopment, including the consequences of gentrification. But, in a way, these are positive problems to have. Nearly all agree that it is great to see a neighborhood on the come-back.
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