

Bridging the Divide: Citizen Participation Versus Urban Renewal, and the Struggle for Community in Trenton, New Jersey

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Executive Summary

This document summarizes historical research on Trenton’s citizen participation against “Urban Renewal” during the 1950s and 1960s. The city’s top-down redevelopment program resulted in extreme social and economic dislocation, including reduced riverfront access and green space. Demolition of Mahlon Stacy Park over widespread grass roots opposition, for example, detached residents from the democratic ideals of a riverfront open space. Decades later, residents and civic leaders remain committed to solutions for growing open space access and recreational programming in the Capital City.

“How did citizen participation connect and conflict with Urban Renewal?” and “What does that history of grass roots participation say about the urban planning and political process today?” After conducting interviews with old and new residents and doing archival research, I concluded Trenton’s past of participation against Urban Renewal created a shared community experience that can benefit the city today. Using this history of participation to develop a modern platform for grass roots civic dialogue can bridge past and present divisions, promote social and economic revitalization, and create new ideas for shaping and re-shaping future urban landscapes, such as Cadwalader Park, in an inclusive way.

Introduction

In 1966, against vigorous community opposition, city and state government officials demolished Mahlon Stacy Park, Trenton's 45-acre riverfront green space for state parking lots and the Route 29 highway. The government's taking of a cherished public space for "Urban Renewal" destroyed a residential health and recreational amenity, perverted a philanthropic gift for the public good, and created a barrier of traffic separating the city from its waterfront.

My undergraduate thesis, written for Princeton University's Department of History, explores the lived effects of top-down government planning and re-ordering of the built environment, such as Stacy Park, on Trenton's residents and business owners during the 1950s and 1960s. It asks "How did citizen participation connect and conflict with Urban Renewal?" and "What does that history of grass roots participation say about the urban planning and political process today?" After conducting interviews and doing archival research, I concluded Trenton's shared past of participation against Urban Renewal can provide a blueprint for modern revitalization by showing how people relate to the built environment and care about making their cities better places to live and work. My findings draw attention to history's utility in bridging past and present divisions, promoting social and economic revitalization, and creating new ideas for shaping and re-shaping future urban landscapes, such as parks, in a more inclusive way. The past story of revitalization, I argue, has created a shared community experience that can bridge modern racial, class, and ethnic divides and benefit Trenton and other cities today.

Research Methods and Findings

Drawing upon historical, journalistic, and ethnographic methods, including archival documents, interviews with past and present residents, and newspapers, this thesis incorporates a bottom-up storytelling approach to show how segments of an urban society interact and are impacted by a top-down policy. The chronological ordering of chapters not only shows Urban Renewal's progression in Trenton, but the inter-connectedness of diverse, disparate residents participating in a "divided" urban civic culture: Carolyn Moore, a realtor, civil rights activist, and housing advocate; Ferdinand Roebing III, an industrialist and civic capitalist; Herman Spiegel, a downtown retailer and local shopping advocate; students at Trenton Central High School; and Albert Segal, a home owner, community organizer, and civic association president.

By juxtaposing these different civic actors, this thesis draws out participation's narrative to demonstrate Trentonians were more united—socially, economically, and politically— than divided in their activities against Urban Renewal. Their passion for preserving a community and its way of life transcended race, class, gender, and geographic distinctions. Moore wrote letters and spoke out against home owner demolitions and red-lining; Roebing litigated Stacy Park's condemnation to assert the old principles of civic capitalism; Spiegel opposed a downtown traffic plan that would undermine the ideal of local shopping; Trenton High students protested inferior educational conditions in hallways and the streets; Segal grew involved with his neighborhood civic association, and led the group as its president for 32 years.

This thesis also shows how Trenton's history of participation is an ongoing, constantly evolving process that, even in short-term failure, carries important meaning for residents, business owners, planners, and politicians today. It does not pretend Trenton's civic actors won against Urban Renewal, but helps correct the record to show that they helped achieve greater

parity in the political process by being the first to object and make their concerns heard. The five stories presented here show that people who live in a city are not passive, and care about where they live and work, despite being ignored or cast aside by the leaders elected to serve and protect their interests, or the planners tasked with designing the built environment.

Of particular note is the story of Stacy Park, whose 1966 destruction detached the city from the democratic ideals of an urban open space. Trenton's riverfront park was a vibrant gathering place, and quality of life amenity for residents, where, on a given day, neighborhood kids played ball near state legislators relaxing on their breaks.

There is a reason, for instance, why Ferd Roebing, Trenton's last civic capitalist, chose a park as the symbol for his Urban Renewal opposition. Open spaces like Stacy Park invited, and still invite, a certain symbolism for a community. They are democratic spaces supporting principles of equality, accessibility, and participation for a vibrant urban landscape. The collaborative work of different Trentonians to build Stacy Park, and subsequently, to oppose its destruction, shows how the riverfront space upheld civic ideals of cooperation and united the community in a common cause, even in demise. It also draws attention to how participation's history can provide a platform for revitalization by engaging open space and recreation users—such as athletes, fitness users, and spectators—around Trenton's green spaces today. The modern interest in environmental sustainability, health, fitness, open space, and public arts, presents one feasible opportunity to use that history of participation to reinvent places such as Cadwalader Park as spaces for dialogue about a city's past that can bridge historical and present-day divisions and promote social and economic growth.

Implications for Practice

Today, Cadwalader Park is Trenton's largest and most historically important green space. Dating to the late nineteenth century, the 100-acre property is only one of a handful nation-wide designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, America's pioneering landscape architect responsible for New York's Central Park, Boston's Emerald Necklace, Stanford University's campus, and the U.S. Capitol grounds, among other projects. There is a long historical precedent of recreational participation in the park, dating to at least 1909. In 1963, for example, the Trenton Junior Chamber of Commerce and Trenton High School organized the first "Mercer County Cross-Country Meet" there, expressing "hope it will become an annual fixture on the area sports circuit."¹ More recently, the park also hosted "Spirit Walks" bringing together residents, faith and civic leaders, as well as health professionals, to help address the city's existing health crisis.

Throughout the twentieth century, Cadwalader's scenic and hilly terrain developed a reputation for challenging elevation gains, and technical turns, but fitness trails (outside the main loop) have largely fallen into disuse. However, the park's history of recreational participation can help revitalize the space today by generating public interest in the old trails, and including residents in the political process necessary to develop, program, and maintain them. The revival of an existing green space would also promote social equality values by uniting communities together through walking and running—two democratic fitness activities—and creating a new residential amenity for happier, healthier living.

Parks with participation histories, such as Cadwalader, are feasible starting points for a conversation about revitalization because they already embody the city's past and present civic ideals for an urban space. Frederick Law Olmsted envisioned parks like Cadwalader "as bastions

¹"Cross Country Race at Park October 11," *Trenton Times*, 9/12/1963.

of the democratic ideals of community and equality” where different citizens could unite behind activities of recreation and participation.² Today, Olmsted’s historic, civic vision for open space remains relevant to the work of a broad coalition of organizations within Trenton: entities concerned with social, economic, and environmental revitalization, such as Isles, the Trenton Downtown Association, and Greater Trenton; organizations focused on improving public health conditions, like the Trenton Health Team; organizations concerned with improving residential quality of life, including churches, neighborhood civic organizations, and the Trenton Council of Civic Associations; and civic organizations focused on recreational participation, such as the NJ Tennis League, the Trenton Track Club, and the Chambersburg Little League.

The city’s history of open space and recreational participation, therefore, can help connect these organizations and residents together in a way that helps redefine urban planning and policymaking from top-down, physical buildings and political structures, toward Olmsted’s original vision: the personalized human values and grass roots issues at the crux of a vibrant urban community. Today, Cadwalader Park and other city areas such as Mill Hill Park, Wetzel Field, and Columbus Park remain symbols of that past, and provide vital infrastructure for future civic efforts to repair Urban Renewal’s lasting social, economic and political damages to Trenton’s green spaces (Stacy Park), neighborhoods, and other built environmental features. They provide a viable platform for civic engagement and programming opportunities such as growing the number of city park visitors, athletic competitions, and recreational programs.

²“Olmsted’s Legacy: Shaper of the American Landscape,” *National Park Service*, 2015. <<https://www.nps.gov/frla/learn/historyculture/shaper-of-the-american-landscape.htm>>

Conclusion

In conclusion, my thesis draws attention to how Trenton's history of participation can reinvent connections between residents and organizations and revitalize modern city spaces, such as parks, by uniting people behind that past. It shows how history is not just synthesizing the past's lessons, but immersing a community into predecessors' lives, and using their stories to help empower modern residents to act. By focusing on citizen participation, my thesis has sought to bridge past with present, and reconcile the city's lived experiences of Urban Renewal outside conventional race, class, ethnic, or geographical distinctions. It has also sought to enrich conversations about civic life and the built environment by drawing extensively upon past and present voices in one community of people who did not work together, but simultaneously maintained a parallel sense of place, and civic purpose. These community-based methods and conclusions provide a viable, modern alternative for "Urban Renewal" and help challenge longtime, existing planning and political conventions within Trenton and other cities today.

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