

Lost in the (re)Process

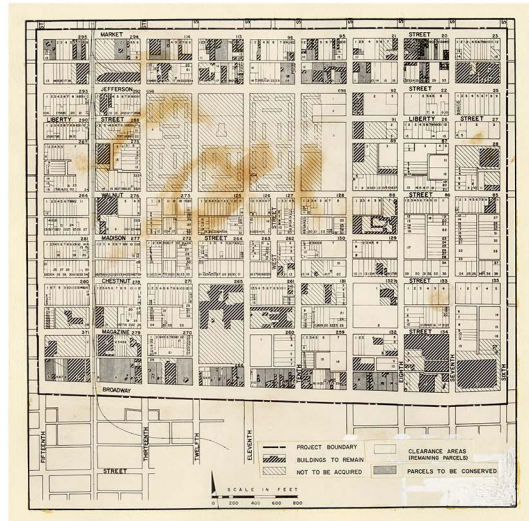
Challenging Constructions of Urban Renewal
in Downtown Louisville

1959-1974

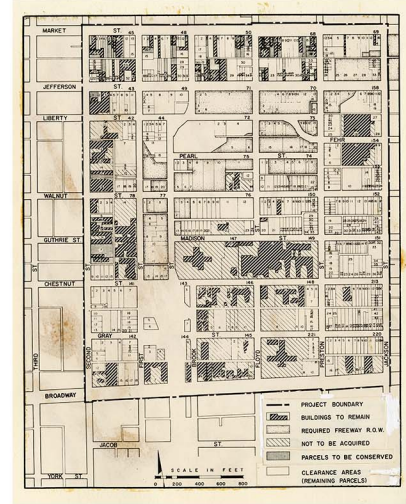


Catalog Essay

Lost in the (re)Process illuminates Downtown Louisville's drastic evolution in the mid-20th century through urban renewal practices predicated upon demolition as the primary method of rehabilitation. Using archival materials from agents operating within the historical period of urban renewal, this exhibition attempts to turn the record against itself by illustrating the process of "renewal," interrogating notions of progress, and ressurecting the visual memory of what was intentionally erased.

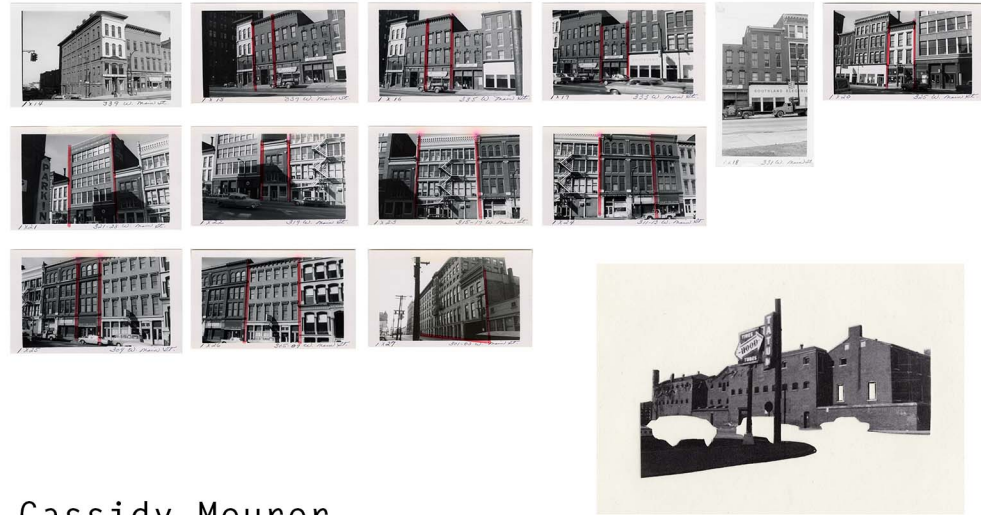


West Downtown Project Area Map, 1962, Barry Bingham, Jr. Courier-Journal Photograph Collection.



East Downtown Project Area Map, 1962, Barry Bingham, Jr. Courier-Journal Photograph Collection.

From the 1930s through the mid-1960s, West Walnut Street in Louisville was home to a wealth of Black owned-and-operated businesses, including nightclubs, theaters, beauty shops, corner stores, and restaurants. This neighborhood was a source of pride, economic prosperity, and community for Black Louisvillians during Jim Crow and through to today, yet it was targeted by the city government. Just as resistance against segregation began among Black activists and student groups, the municipal Urban Renewal Commission cleared the area of all but a few structures, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of families, individuals, and businesses. Walnut Street was not alone - total clearance was the treatment for over 600 acres in Louisville's "blighted" downtown neighborhoods.



Cassidy Meurer

Cassidy Meurer, curator and artist, is the Archivist for the Barry Bingham, Jr. Courier-Journal Photograph Collection at Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville. This exhibition is the evolution of her master's thesis in Art History *Lost in the (re)Process: Challenging Constructions of Urban Renewal in Downtown Louisville*, completed in 2024. As an archivist operating from within an institution that directly benefited from urban renewal practices and holds archival materials narrating this history, Meurer understands her privileged position in terms of access and opportunity.

Shachaf Polakow

Shachaf Polakow is a visual and sound artist based in Louisville, Kentucky and an assistant professor at the Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville. His work, grounded in documentary and photography, explores the relationships between human and their environments, with a long-standing focus on struggles for social and environmental justice. In recent years, his practice has expanded to sound, video and installation, with a growing focus on American landscapes. His current research engages in digital aesthetics and computational tools, reworking technologies of measurement and control into critical perspectives. Additionally, he is researching counter-narratives in archives and the possibilities of alternative archival practices.

Archival Index

1. Urban Renewal Agency records, Metro Archives & Records Center, Louisville, Kentucky.

This collection contains federal grant applications, project and parcel files, relocation files, original maps and more for the city's Urban Renewal Agency from the mid-1950s to 1980. As the origin archival collection for the Urban Renewal Commission photograph collection, each survey image has a corresponding file in this collection.

2. Louisville-Jefferson County Urban Renewal Program publications, Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville.

The Annual Reports published by the Urban Renewal Commission, designed by Images (Julius Friedman and Nathan Felde) can be found here, as well as publications from Urban Renewal county projects from the late-20th century.

3. Unfair Housing; African-American Community Interviews; Home for Us All: Housing in Louisville and Jefferson County; Voices of Russell in a Time of Change collections, Oral History Center, Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville.

Many interviews from these collections were excerpted for the *Lost in the (re)Process* exhibition. Full transcripts, audio, and additional interviews can be located through the Oral History Center.

4. Martin F. Schmidt photographs of Louisville, Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville.

This small photograph collection consists of mostly color photographs of Louisville's Central Business District from the 1950s and 1960s before being permanently altered by Urban Renewal.

5. Ivey Watkins Cousins negative collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

This collection of negatives surveys areas of Downtown and Old Louisville in the 1950s before highway construction demolished a majority of the depicted structures. Mostly Broadway north to Main Street, and the main north/south streets in the same area.

6. Barry Bingham, Jr. Courier-Journal photograph collection. Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville.

While still closed to the public for processing, this photograph collection contains an estimated 7 million photographic items created by staff for the Courier-Journal and Louisville Times Photography Department from 1937 to 2000. This collection is a rich document of nearly every aspect of life in Louisville, including the constantly changing landscape of our city, but also the consistent fight for justice and equality through the 20th century.



Images made by photographers for the *Courier-Journal* and *Louisville Times* newspapers document the extreme changes made to the city's built environment in the 1960s and 1970s as the Civil Rights Movement progressed in Louisville. Aerial photographs depict the East Downtown, West Downtown, and Riverfront Urban Renewal Project Areas. Dramatic demolitions of historic structures, local businesses, and multifamily residences raise questions about the cost of "renewal," rendering the era as stunningly violent and disrupting for Louisville residents. These photographs not only tell the story of a changing terrain, but they serve as an indictment of the city's buy-in to practices of cyclonic displacement.



Top Left: Area cleared in West Downtown for Village West, photograph by Billy Davis, December 14, 1969, *The Courier-Journal*. Top Right: Aerial of East Downtown, file photograph, December 9, 1965, *The Courier-Journal*. Bottom: Tearing down a residence on West Chestnut, photograph by Al Blunk, September 25, 1963, *The Courier-Journal*. All from the Barry Bingham Jr. Courier-Journal Photograph Collection.

Newspaper photographs of destruction are paired alongside survey snapshots depicting the same locations pre-demolition. Produced as tools for assessing the value of structures that fell within the Project Areas, the Urban Renewal survey photographs also function as a rich chronicle of these neighborhoods shortly before their sanctioned destruction. These pairings cause a fracture in photography's static perception, activating the archival materials in a push/pull between documentary and projection. authority and narrative.



Top: One house remains on East Chestnut Street, photo by Warren Klosterman, January 26, 1964, *The Courier-Journal*, Barry Bingham, Jr. Courier-Journal Photograph Collection.
Bottom: Five survey photographs of houses on East Chestnut Street, 1961, Urban Renewal Commission Photograph Collection.

Urban Renewal Commission Photograph Collection

The Urban Renewal Commission photograph collection, donated from Metro Archives & Records Center in 1989 and now housed at the University of Louisville Archives & Special Collections, provides the foundation for this exhibition. Containing over 2,500 survey photographs made by cost appraisers for the Urban Renewal Commission in 1960 and 1961, this collection depicts nearly every structure the city government demolished in the Riverfront, East Downtown, and West Downtown Project Areas, spanning 600 acres. Federal funding from the American Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 meant that Louisville was not alone in being touched by urban renewal. It was a concept, initiated by Harland Bartholomew, that spread like a virus through hundreds of cities and towns across the United States. "Blighted" neighborhoods were treated with "slum clearance," and entire city blocks were wiped away. The plots of land made available through urban renewal were put up for sale to private developers who were under no obligation to replace what was lost. The Urban Renewal Commission photograph collection, an archive of images created as a mechanism for destruction, is now the most complete documentation of Downtown Louisville neighborhoods as they once existed, captured on the verge of their non-existence.

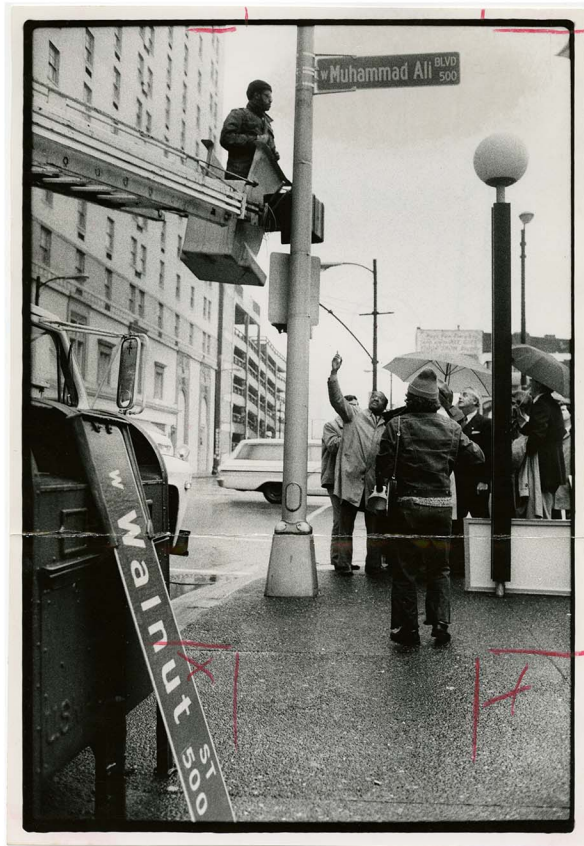


The Urban Renewal Commission photograph collection will soon be available online in University of Louisville Digital Collections (digital.library.louisville.edu)

A Statement on Resistance

The destruction and violence caused by urban renewal created a destabilization of the nucleus of the influential Black community found in West Walnut Street and surrounding streets. Yet, Louisvillians have resisted, both then and since, the displacement, mistreatment, and erasure from the city of Louisville, seen in the Civil Rights Movement through the 1960s to today.

This exhibition does not attempt to visually narrate the demonstrations that occurred throughout the 1960s for public accommodations, open housing, and against police brutality, in the wake of urban renewal's wrecking ball through Downtown Louisville. This exhibition insists upon these histories as deeply intertwined. In provoking the viewer to question the citizen's relationship to the city, to land, and to power, this exhibition seeks to promote historical agency and offer tools to imagine alternate futures that reckon with Louisville's past.



Page 7: Replacing Walnut Street signs with Muhammad Ali Boulevard, photo by Cort Best, December 7, 1978, *The Courier-Journal*, Barry Bingham, Jr. Courier-Journal Photograph Collection.

Page 8: Eight survey photographs of North 100 Block of East Jefferson Street, 1961, Urban Renewal Commission Photograph Collection.



As an artistic intervention into the mythmaking of urban renewal, each survey photograph of West Walnut Street merges in an attempt at resurrection. These haunted structures connect, bleed into one another, and splinter upon impact. They are abstracted and fragmented, yet exist as a reconstruction of the famed Black neighborhood. Research culled from the 1959 Louisville City Directory recovers the identity of these buildings, invoking the community that once filled them. Further animation and reflection is realized through voices of those who experienced Walnut Street and witnessed its decimation at the hands of the city government.

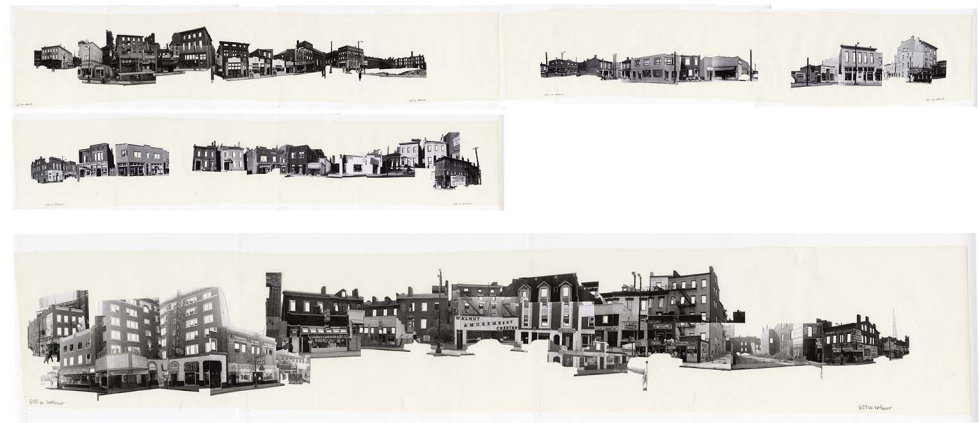
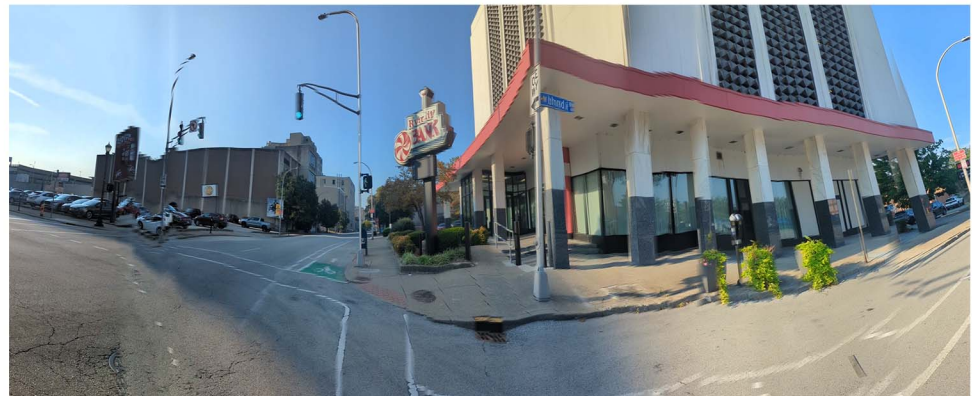
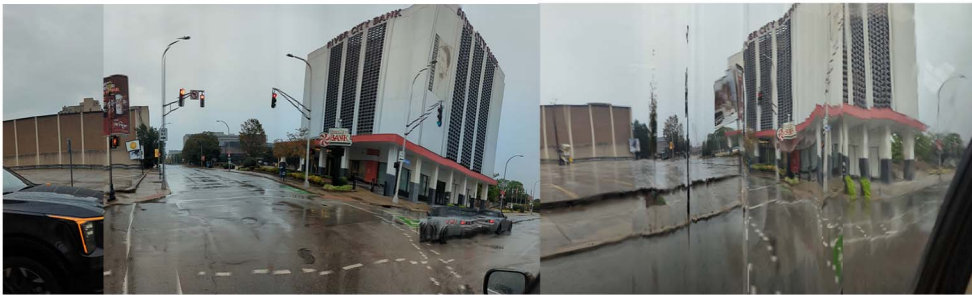


Top: South 700 Block, West Walnut Street, collage of survey photographs from the Urban Renewal Commission photograph collection, by Cassidy Meurer.
Bottom: Five survey photographs of houses on East Chestnut Street, 1961, Urban Renewal Commission Photograph Collection.



When revisiting the area shaped by urban renewal, one cannot escape its haunted past. What was once a thriving, vibrant neighborhood has become a landscape of broken promises; high-rise towers, vast parking lots, and wide roads cutting through what remains. Through 3D scanning and algorithmic photography, a new vision emerges: a fractured urban terrain, digitally distorted. It is a vision shaped by the very machines that continually survey the city, the same technologies that are used to justify its transformation, now turned toward exposing its fragile, unfinished promises.

Fractured Promises
Shachaf Polakow



These streets exist now as specters: an elegiac, incomplete whole, missing windows, automobiles, gaps within the record. Facades filled with the memory of what was, what could be, what can't ever be again. Rooted in grief, this work is an attempt to defang the images from their original, institutional use as a tool of violence. It attempts instead to repurpose them with a new generative goal of intentional future visions. But these records exist so that the structures do not; this tension is impossible to resolve. What is left is a haunting, an unfulfilled multiplicity of a community displaced.

Top: North 601 Block, North 701 Block, North 801 Block, North 1401 Block of West Walnut Street, collage of survey photographs from the Urban Renewal Commission photograph collection, by Cassidy Meurer.
Bottom: Detail of North 1301 Block of West Walnut Street, collage of survey photographs from the Urban Renewal Commission photograph collection, by Cassidy Meurer.

