

# Special issue: Urban sights: visual culture and urban history

## Conflicting visions of renewal in Pittsburgh's Hill District, 1950–1968

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**ABSTRACT:** Visual representations of the Lower Hill District created by Pittsburgh's redevelopment coalition and by neighbourhood insiders reveal the conflicting ways redevelopers and residents understood older neighbourhoods and their redevelopment. Redevelopers' maps and photographs of the Lower Hill documented the neighbourhood's densely built-up blocks and intermixture of land uses as definitive examples of blight that threatened downtown's economic health. Models and architectural sketches of the Civic Arena – the jewel of the Lower Hill's redevelopment plan – promised to wipe away blight and renew the city. Redevelopers distributed their imagery through brochures and the city's daily press. Framed by captions labelling the Lower Hill a 'blight' and the Civic Arena a 'wonder of the modern world', these images helped sell the public on redevelopment. Lower Hill insiders, most notably the city's African American newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Courier's* lead photographer, Charles 'Teenie' Harris, envisioned the Lower Hill and its redevelopment differently. Harris and the *Courier* criticized the neighbourhood's dilapidated housing but celebrated its thriving social life. They also supported redevelopment but saw it primarily as a route to new jobs and improved housing for Hill residents. After the Civic Arena opened in 1961, redevelopment failed to deliver more jobs or better housing because redevelopers' worldview prioritized the built over the social environment. Hill District residents, led by the *Courier*, reacted to these shortcomings with visual protests pairing redevelopers' favourite symbol of progress – the brand new Civic Arena – with symbols of racial injustice. By spotlighting the inequalities that undergirded redevelopers' vision for the city, these protests stopped redevelopment from spreading further into the Hill in 1968.

This Scalar site can be viewed at: <http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/urban-sights-visual-culture-and-urban-history/index>