The Hill District: Preserving Cultural Legacy and Fighting for the Soul of a Community

The Hill District (the Hill) represents, perhaps better than any other neighborhood in Pittsburgh, the promise, potential, and ultimate decline of a community due to disastrous public policy and broader economic and social trends taking place in the 20th century.

Once the African American cultural center of Pittsburgh, a vibrant hub for jazz, and one of the most prosperous and influential African American communities in the nation, the Hill experienced significant economic decline and residential loss in the latter half of the 20th century. Urban Renewal efforts in the 1960s led to the demolition of 1,300 structures, which displaced 8,000 residents, the majority of which were African American. The redevelopment effectively separated the Hill from other neighborhoods and ushered in a period of severe economic decline.

This decline was bolstered by broader trends facing Pittsburgh, including massive job losses, and middle-class residents moving to newer suburban developments. The Hill lost 71 percent of its residents, more than 38,000 individuals, between 1950 and 1990. The median household income for the Hill is $21,795, nearly half of what it is for the City of Pittsburgh at $42,450, according to the 2016 American Community Survey.

The Hill was also the birthplace of Pulitzer Prize winning playwright August Wilson, who wrote his most famous works, The Pittsburgh Cycle, about life in the Hill during this period of significant change and upheaval. Today, Wilson’s house in the Hill is undergoing a renovation project supported through a $5 million fundraising effort by celebrities including Denzel Washington, Oprah Winfrey, Tyler Perry, Shonda Rhimes, Spike Lee, and Samuel L. Jackson.

The Civic Arena, which served as the home of the Pittsburgh Penguins for 43 years, has since been demolished. The 28 acre-site in the Lower Hill remains undeveloped. In March 2019, the Penguins announced a new master plan with over 1,400 housing units, 810,000 square feet of office space, 190,000 square feet of retail, 50,000 square feet of entertainment, and a 220-room hotel.
The plan also includes four acres of parks and green space, which will help connect the development to the Hill and Downtown. The City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County are expected to begin construction this summer on a $26.4 million cap, including a four-acre park, over the Crosstown Expressway connecting to the green space in the Hill development project.

With construction expected to begin in the fall, the first phase of the project will include 274 housing units and a 200,000-square-foot office building, with 50,000 square feet of retail. Affordable housing is part of the plan, with 20% of the housing units affordable to 80% of area median income. A Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance Act district has also been established, which is expected to generate $25 million to be invested in the Hill District.

The team has hired two developers for the project – Wilmington, Delaware-based Buccini/Pollin Group who will develop the office space and commercial parts of the plan, and Pittsburgh-based Intergen, a minority-owned developer, that will focus on the housing pieces of the project.

After a series of setbacks, this new development plan is being praised by many key stakeholders, including Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto and City Councilman Daniel Lavelle, who represents the Hill District.

As the Hill prepares for a major re-development effort, how will its rich cultural legacy be preserved and what is being done to prevent further displacement of its residents? What role do the Hill community organizations play in ensuring that the neighborhood is transformed in a way that benefits existing residents? Atlanta’s Westside neighborhoods have shared a similar fate with the Hill over the years. What lessons can Atlanta learn from similar efforts underway in Pittsburgh to preserve a neighborhood’s cultural fabric?

Further Reading

*After years of waiting, Hill District residents consider the Penguins’ latest plan for the Civic Arena site*
  *Public Source – March 14, 2019*

*‘Let’s do something great’ — Penguins unveil big new vision for former Arena site*
  *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette – March 8, 2019*

*Denzel Washington returns to the Hill District to bestow $5 million on August Wilson House*
  *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette – September 26, 2018*

*Pittsburgh Lower Hill District*
  *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Interactive – June 18, 2018*

*The Hill District, a community holding on through displacement and development*
  *Public Source – December 27, 2017*

*August Wilson’s Pittsburgh*
  *New York Times – August 15, 2017*