Remember the Fillmore: The Lingering History of Urban Renewal in Black San Francisco

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Remember the Fillmore: The Lingering History of Urban Renewal in Black San Francisco

Abstract
In the summer of 2008, I moved to San Francisco, California. I lived in the city for three months. As a researcher, my objective was to learn more about Mayor Gavin Newsome’s African-American Out-Migration Task Force. The Task Force convened in 2007 and met eight times from August to December. In 2009, the Mayor’s office released a final report on the Redevelopment Agency’s website that summarized the history of blacks in the city and outlined several recommendations for reversing their flight. The final report found that the political, economic, and social conditions of African-Americans are disproportionately more dire than any other group in San Francisco. During our conversations, some task force members suggested that this dire condition could be due to the lack of a black middle-class, which could act as a “connective tissue” between San Francisco’s poor black community and the city’s decision makers. The Task Force reported that although blacks had been in San Francisco for decades, many African-Americans, especially poor blacks, often felt disconnected from much of the city life. That finding resonated with what I heard during my interviews with the middle- to upper-middle class African-American members of the Task Force and with my observations of how residents and visitors shared public space in the Fillmore neighborhood, one of the city’s historically black neighborhoods. [excerpt]

Keywords
San Francisco, African American Out-Migration Task Force, urban communities, African American families, Fillmore District

Disciplines
African American Studies | American Popular Culture | Community-Based Research | Race and Ethnicity | Social History | Sociology | Urban Studies and Planning

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"The privileging of indigenous knowledge, of blues epistemology, and of millions of organic intellectuals denies power to another elite-led regime of stagnation. What is left? A society where every member is both a teacher and a student."

— Clyde Woods, Development Arrested
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The photo depicts the Library still standing while other buildings around it were burned down in the aftermath of the Los Angeles Rebellion in 1992. One of those buildings was a liquor store across the street from the library.
Remember the Fillmore: The Lingering History of Urban Renewal in Black San Francisco

Christina Jackson & Nikki Jones

In the summer of 2008, I moved to San Francisco, California. I lived in the city for three months. As a researcher, my objective was to learn more about Mayor Gavin Newsome’s African-American Out-Migration Task Force. The Task Force convened in 2007 and met eight times from August to December. In 2009, the Mayor’s office released a final report on the Redevelopment Agency’s website that summarized the history of blacks in the city and outlined several recommendations for reversing their flight. The final report found that the political, economic, and social conditions of African-Americans are disproportionately more dire than any other group in San Francisco. During our conversations, some task force members suggested that this dire condition could be due to the lack of a black middle-class, which could act as a “connective tissue” between San Francisco’s poor black community and the city’s decision makers. The Task Force reported that although blacks had been in San Francisco for decades, many African-Americans, especially poor blacks, often felt disconnected from much of the city life. That finding resonated with what I heard during my interviews with the middle- to upper-middle class African-American members of the Task Force and with my observations of how residents and visitors shared public space in the Fillmore neighborhood, one of the city’s historically black neighborhoods.

For example, in July 2008, I attended the Fillmore Jazz Festival, an event sponsored by the Fillmore District Community Benefit District to commemorate the 1940s and 1950s jazz scene in the neighborhood. The event was described in a local newspaper as a weekend that would feature “the best smooth jazz, soul, funk, and downright cool music guaranteed to get you on your feet.” Visitors were invited to “enjoy gourmet foods, unique artwork, refreshing beverages, and all the charm of the Fillmore District.” The event took place on Fillmore Street, a main thoroughfare in the neighborhood. The following reflection, which I recorded in my field notes an hour after my visit to the event, captures my initial impressions of how different groups of attendees participated in the event and how their participation appeared to be patterned by race and class:

Field note entry: July 6, 2008

When I turned onto Fillmore Street from Eddy Street, I first noticed...
the crowd of people, one big stage and a string of white tents. A jazz band was on stage and a huge crowd of people was camped out on a tarp listening and bopping to the music while others listened from the sidewalk. The festival’s four stages hosted different jazz artists all day. Away from the stages, vendors sold jewelry, energy drinks, foods, handbags, and art.

I expected that most of the people who attended the Fillmore Jazz Festival—a long with the vendors—would be black, but as I walked around I noticed white, black, and Asian residents among the crowd. The scene reminded me of Philadelphia’s West Oak Lane Jazz Festival, where the typical audience is predominately black with few other ethnic groups in attendance. Here, I was very surprised to see a more diverse crowd. Older white men and women danced to the jazz numbers. They seemed to take up more space than the black residents who were older and more middle-class, but also seemed to enjoy the music as they listened while softly bopping their heads. As a young black woman in her early 20s, I noticed that I didn’t see many other young black women or men like me sitting down to enjoy the music.

The booth that most caught my attention was for the Fillmore Jazz Heritage Center. The Jazz Heritage Center is located at the corner of Fillmore and Eddy streets, inside the Fillmore Heritage Center, a retail and residential complex that opened in 2007. One older white woman, a younger black woman in her twenties, and a young white guy were working the booth. I asked them if they all worked for the Fillmore Jazz Heritage Center and they said yes. The center’s slogan is “The Rebirth of the Cool.” I noticed this slogan at the booth and on flyers around Fillmore Street. The vendors offered me several pamphlets about the Jazz Heritage Center. They also sold T-shirts that featured images of jazz musicians on their front. I was also offered an opportunity to enter a raffle to win a dinner for four at Yoshi’s, a jazz club in the Center. The Heritage Center’s pamphlet included a quotation from Mayor Gavin Newsom: “The Fillmore Heritage Center is a cornerstone of my commitment to restore the economic viability and population of San Francisco’s African-American community.” There were other quotations from the former mayor, Willie Brown—the city’s first black mayor—about how the jazz scene “used to be.”

As I take in the scene in front of me, I notice that none of these publications or pamphlets speak to the struggling lower-class black community that lives in the Fillmore. Issues that were brought up at community meetings I attended, like the recent “State of Black San Francisco” meeting held in the Lower Fillmore (the area below Geary Boulevard), are not part of the new effort to rebrand the neighborhood. The community forum sought to provide information to concerned residents on how to eliminate disparities faced by African-Americans. I realized that the community forum and this jazz festival represent two very different sides of the same neighborhood. On the one side, the Fillmore is packaged as a tourist attraction—a destination neighborhood—that uses jazz history as a way to attract artists and music lovers to the community with the hope that these visitors would buy property and revitalize the neighborhood. On the other side, local...
activists and residents represent the Fillmore as a neighborhood in major conflict with the city over how to meet the needs of struggling blacks who don’t see a hopeful future for themselves in the neighborhood.

This reflection illustrates my initial understanding of the two very different sides of the Fillmore. Over time, I learned that the Fillmore is represented differently depending on the situation and the audience. Different residents also offer different understandings of the Fillmore, depending on their stakes in the neighborhood and its renewal. For example, the Fillmore Jazz Festival is mostly about buying things. In many ways, it represents the commodification of “cool” in the city. The festival opens up a space for financially secure whites on Fillmore Street to enjoy black culture and especially jazz music. They can dance and enjoy the music. Some older black residents may attend the jazz festival as a way to connect to what the Fillmore used to be. The Fillmore District Community Benefit District (FDCBD) and the Fillmore Jazz Preservation District (FJPD) promote events and retail and residential projects that they believe will help to stimulate the neighborhood’s economy south of Geary Boulevard, which is something of a dividing line between the more white and middle-class population “up the hill” and the poorer African-American population in the Lower Fillmore. Yet, many Fillmore residents feel at odds with city-funded efforts, and report that they gloss over the real struggles in the Fillmore and marginalize the voices of its low- and middle-income residents. A common belief among these residents is that city-funded efforts are not beneficial to the black residents who have lived in the neighborhood for decades. Instead, they argue, these efforts are oriented toward drawing the city’s white community and newcomers to the neighborhood. These residents see the Fillmore Jazz festival and the African-American Out-Migration Task Force as examples of city-supported projects that fail to deliver on their promise to improve the social and economic situation of San Francisco’s black community. This skepticism is not confined to projects that take place in the Fillmore. When similar projects are proposed in other parts of the city, like the proposed redevelopment projects in Bayview-Hunter’s Point, activists and residents implore city officials and community members to “Remember the Fillmore!”

How do memories of past battles shape the experiences of African-Americans with redevelopment in San Francisco today? In this essay, we draw on field research conducted among members of San Francisco’s black community to describe how the history of urban renewal in the Fillmore shapes responses to urban redevelopment projects in the city today, especially in historically black neighborhoods such as Bayview-Hunter’s Point (BVHP). We draw on ethnographic fieldwork, including direct observation, participant observation, and in-depth interviews conducted by the first author from 2008 to 2010, to illustrate how residents of Bayview-Hunter’s Point draw on memories of the Fillmore to challenge and change the city’s plans for redevelopment in their neighborhood. We begin this article with a short history of African-American migration to San Francisco in the wake of World War II
and the experiences of African-Americans in the city since the end of the war. We then describe a common sentiment among a sub-set of African-Americans in the city—that urban renewal, like the renewal that changed the Fillmore neighborhood, leads to the displacement of blacks from the city—and how that sentiment shapes understandings of the city’s efforts to redevelop neighborhoods in the city today.

**Figure 1.** The Fillmore Jazz Festival, 2006. The crowd at the annual Fillmore Jazz Festival. Photograph courtesy of Nikki Jones

**Figure 2.** “Remember the Fillmore—Never Again!” 2006. The sign on this table at San Francisco’s 56th Annual Juneteenth Festival warns city residents to “remember the Fillmore.” Activists distribute information to passersby and encourage others to sign petitions to “save our neighborhood” and stop redevelopment in Bayview-Hunter’s Point. Photograph courtesy of Nikki Jones
For a brief period in the 1940s and 1950s, the Fillmore was home to a vibrant African-American community that was often referred to by locals as “the Harlem of the West.”

Black migrants were recruited to work at the shipyard in Bayview-Hunter’s Point after the introduction of anti-discrimination policies during World War II opened up opportunities and training for skilled and semi-skilled black labor, including many from the South. The influx of migrants helped to create an African-American community around the shipyard and in the Fillmore neighborhood. For many city residents and Navy officials, however, the influx of black migrants represented a social and civic problem for the city. During a conference on Negro personnel, a Navy Admiral warned, “We are faced with a problem—a very serious problem—in connection with our naval enlisted personnel and that is the introduction into the District of the large numbers of Negro personnel... The order has come now and it isn’t a question of whether anybody likes it or not.”

Despite Navy officials’ initial reluctance toward integration, in 1943, after Executive Order 8802 was enacted, 112,000 blacks completed the war training in shipbuilding, aircraft repair, and machinery. The shipyard and related war industries allowed blacks to enter previously restricted fields, which helped migrants to increase their social and economic well-being during the war. The war industry also opened up job opportunities.
opportunities for women. Black residents took pride in their jobs at the shipyard and the black community in the city benefited from its connection to the war industry.

Even though the war industry opened up opportunities for black migrants, blacks still faced patterns of racism and exclusion in other areas, such as housing. The city’s residents were not prepared for the large African-American immigration during the war period. During this time, exclusionary housing practices intensified and, especially after the war’s end, white flight increased. The threat of a “black invasion” stoked the fears of white homeowners and helped to transform inner-city neighborhoods such as the Fillmore into what urban historians and geographers such as Arnold Hirsch describe as the Second Ghetto. In such areas, “government policy and decision making, especially public housing location and urban renewal, [triggered] racial transitions of formerly white neighborhoods and, subsequently, [resulted] in concentrating and containing African-Americans in these newer, ‘second’ ghettos.” Racial tensions were also exacerbated by violence, riots, and bombings in the city during the 1960s. These institutional and interpersonal practices and processes maintained racial segregation and limited the choice of housing for blacks. These practices helped to turn neighborhoods such as the Fillmore into ghettos, a “place in which the involuntary segregated are housed…the spatial representation of a socio-political process of involuntary segregation.”

Black residents of the Fillmore responded to patterns of institutional exclusion by transforming their neighborhoods into spaces of freedom and culture. This sort of response is what made the Fillmore the “Harlem of the West.” In the years following the end of the war, however, the shipyard closed and government officials eventually declared portions of the Fillmore neighborhood a slum. Block by block, the neighborhood was razed and replaced by housing projects. Some lots remained vacant for decades.

**Urban Renewal and Negro Removal in San Francisco**

During a visit to San Francisco’s Fillmore neighborhood in 1963, the writer James Baldwin described the city’s efforts at urban renewal as “Negro removal.” By the time of Baldwin’s visit, the Fillmore area had already been declared a slum and was targeted for urban renewal. Two urban redevelopment plans were implemented, the “Western Addition A-1” in 1953 and “Western Addition A-2” in 1963. These efforts were implemented under the leadership of Justin Herman. The agency used eminent domain to take control of land in the Fillmore, which led to the displacement of thousands of families. I interviewed one of the city’s well-known African-American leaders, Reverend White, who is now sixty-seven years old and the head of one of the oldest churches in the Western Addition. As soon as we took a seat in his office, he proceeded to tell me the history of his church and explained the church’s historic position as an advocate for the black community in the city. Like Baldwin, Reverend White used the term “black removal” when describing the impact that urban renewal has had on the neighborhood. Reverend
White’s comments also highlighted the racial politics that characterize the history of gentrification and redevelopment in the city:

The Redevelopment Agency, forty years ago, said to the African-American community: “We’re gonna tear down these old houses, these old Victorians, y’all can rebuild the community... Those of you who have businesses and have homes, we’re going to give you a certificate, once things that need to be rebuilt are rebuilt, [then] you can come back.” That’s what that whole Fillmore area is supposed to have been, but the Redevelopment Agency did not keep faith; it did not deliver on its promises to black folk. It was not urban renewal. It was black removal!

Reverend White also explained the economic consequences of these broken promises for blacks in the city: “After forty years... [they] took homes from people and through redlining others [we] were forced to sell our Victorian homes. These homes would be worth millions today. And who gets the millions of dollars out of the ones that they didn’t tear down now? By and large, white folk!” From Reverend White’s perspective, it is white people who have profited most from redevelopment and the displacement of blacks in the Fillmore. Reverend White’s assertion is partially supported by statistics. After urban redevelopment plans were implemented, only 4 percent of black-owned businesses returned to the neighborhood. Thousands of black families, including those who owned homes and businesses, were displaced. This displacement interrupted the accumulation of intergenerational wealth that could have been gained from these investments. Most importantly, a sense of trust and community, along with a sense of “rootedness,” was lost due to urban renewal.

Frank, a forty-nine-year-old community organizer and resident of BVHP, described urban renewal in the Fillmore: “They made a way to get you out, and once they got you out, they don’t have to worry about you too much.” Frank’s comment echoes similar sentiments shared by residents who believe that past and present redevelopment projects are thinly veiled efforts to move blacks out of their neighborhood in order to make room for more desirable populations.

In the wake of redevelopment, the Fillmore, like other inner-city neighborhoods across the country, experienced the various consequences of deindustrialization and the erosion of the social safety net, such as an increased concentration of poverty, increased crime, rapidly deteriorating schools, and an increase in drug trafficking and the violence associated with the drug trade. Brother Ben, who came of age when vacant lots dotted much of the neighborhood’s landscape, recalls the struggle that characterized growing up in the neighborhood during this time period:

I remember struggle at a young age. To a degree that sometimes we didn’t even have nothing to eat. And I can remember that; it stays. I mean, I didn’t know why my mother would be going off to herself crying certain nights and crying herself to sleep. But as I got older I could
realize: it’s that she couldn’t provide for us. And the stress, the ultimate toll that took on her is what led her to start using alcohol, drinking… So that’s what I can remember from an early age.

Ben’s memory of struggle reflects an understanding of how structural forces like redevelopment affected his experience growing up in the Fillmore. The combined effects of redevelopment, racism, poverty, unemployment, and addiction shape how he thinks about urban renewal efforts today. Residents such as Ben are attuned to how plans for neighborhood change can impact people’s lives. Some residents see a similar, although less dramatic, pattern in current efforts to profit off of the neighborhood’s jazz history.

Today, much of the Fillmore’s black community lives in public housing units near Fillmore Street. The area is gentrifying quickly. Young, middle-class, white urbanites give the neighborhood a different feel than what many longtime black residents remember. Many people who hear about urban redevelopment today do not share the history of struggle that Brother Ben describes above. For many who are familiar with the city, including the residents of the nearby Lower Pacific Heights, Alamo Square and Japantown neighborhoods, areas like the Fillmore or BVHP are largely defined as bad neighborhoods marked by poverty, crime, and violence. This remains true even as the Fillmore enters a new phase of renewal. In recent years, gentrification has extended the boundaries of neighboring Lower Pacific Heights deeper into the Lower Fillmore yet clear boundaries remain around what is commonly considered some of the most troubled parts of the neighborhood by outsiders, especially the federally subsidized housing projects along Eddy Street.

Longtime black city residents remember the time before renewal as a period when the Fillmore neighborhood was a cultural hub for the black community, but also acknowledge the changes that have occurred over the last several decades. For example, Reverend Johnson, a sixty-five-year-old black man and active participant in community politics, contrasted the Fillmore in its “heyday” with the Fillmore today this way:

I remember what Fillmore was like in its heyday… That’s where my kids was raised, that’s where I met my wife, you know where my church is, all of that, that’s where I used to club. I remember how hip it was, party, party, party, and so I’m willing to hang in there and wait, but now, you, my daughter… you don’t remember anything, because when you came along, that was gone. You don’t have that tie [to the neighborhood]. You don’t have that memory, and so all Fillmore is to you is where you live not very well, and you can’t buy no home… and guess what, now you want to start your family and you want your first home. You got your degree, you got a job, you work hard, you save money, you deserve it, [but] you can’t buy it here and there’s no memory to make you struggle and save to stay here [and why] when you can have. You struggle and
save to stay here, [but why] when you can have more product for one half the cost? Instead of $600,000, you can go somewhere, out there in Fairfield, [or] Sacramento and get the same house or bigger for three, four hundred, c’mon!

Reverend Johnson refers to a time in the Fillmore that doesn’t exist anymore. He remembers when the Fillmore was a neighborhood that included all of the essential components of social life: his family, his place of worship, and places of leisure and recreation. Older residents remember the Fillmore as a cultural hub. In contemporary meetings about redevelopment, they call on this history to fight for control over a process that destroyed the neighborhoods they grew up in. Longtime black residents often refer nostalgically to a sense of unity cultivated during their participation in protests, union-mobilization efforts, black social clubs, the famous black jazz scene and the vibrant cultural hub that was the Fillmore. This sense of unity helped black people to grow roots in the San Franciscan community. Yet, these roots are showing their wear. Today, African-American San Franciscan residents under forty-five are three times more likely to leave the city than their older African-American counterparts. Those who have not lived in the city for twenty years or more are more likely to say they would move within three years. These findings indicate that younger individuals may not have the same relationship to the neighborhood and city as older residents who have lived there when the neighborhood was more unified. Many younger blacks are like Reverend Johnson’s daughter. The “redeveloped” Fillmore is also too expensive for them.

The new development that has taken root in the neighborhood over the last few years was funded by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency (SFRA), which controlled much of the neighborhood for the past sixty years. On January 1, 2009, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency ended its decades-long redevelopment project in the Fillmore. The attention of both the agency and the city turned to completing the redevelopment and “renewal” of Bayview-Hunter’s Point (BVHP), which started in the 1960s. Generations of black families have lived in this part of San Francisco since the end of the war, many of them living in poverty. The shipyard still holds a great deal of meaning for longtime community members. Many are determined to gain control of this space and resist efforts to erase their social histories through redevelopment and gentrification. In BVHP, located across the city from the Fillmore but still connected through social history and social relationships, public battles over space and place play out—as they once did in the Fillmore—during regular community meetings. Neighborhood activists who are familiar with how redevelopment and false promises of renewal shaped the Fillmore’s desperately warn city residents and community members to “remember the Fillmore.” The phrase is invoked as a warning of the harm that urban renewal projects can do to a neighborhood’s cohesion.
Figure 4. The Fillmore Center, 2006. The Fillmore Center apartment complex opened in the 1980s. It was built during the A-2 phase or redevelopment in the Fillmore, which began in 1963. Photograph courtesy of Nikki Jones
FIGURE 5. Redevelopment and Renewal, 2006. The new Fillmore Heritage Center is being built across the street from the Fillmore Center. Photograph courtesy of Nikki Jones

FIGURE 6. The New Fillmore Heritage Center, 2007. The Fillmore Heritage Center opened in 2007. Some of the city’s African-American residents believe that the Heritage Center was built to attract more desirable populations to the Lower Fillmore, like those featured here. Photograph courtesy of Nikki Jones
The Past is Always Present: Remembering the Fillmore Today

When we lived in the Fillmore, it was a community of black folks. I mean, we had nightclubs and movie theaters, restaurants, and what we call real food. They call it soul food here. We call it real food, okay?

- Angela, 63-year-old African-American community organizer

Angela’s description of the Fillmore, like the descriptions of others noted in this essay, harkens back to a Fillmore that was, but is no longer. She describes a time when the neighborhood was home to clubs and restaurants and other businesses that black people could afford and where black people were welcomed. This sense of community and belonging was part of what was lost after the Fillmore was destroyed by urban renewal. Angela explains:

In the Fillmore, right there on Fillmore Street, there was a [dry-]cleaners there. My family would drop their coats and whatever was dry-cleanable there, and I could go back in a couple days and pick it up and say [to the owner], “Mom says she’ll take care of you whenever.” The owner would say, “Sure, just go. Your mom said she wanted this right back.” You know what we do… We were a community… everybody. He didn’t worry about getting paid, because he knew it was gonna get paid. And mom would be here Friday or Dad would be here Friday and pay you, whatever. We lost all that.

Angela is one of a number of other residents I interviewed who described the Fillmore of their youth as a tightly knit African-American neighborhood characterized by a “sense of community.” This is what was lost after urban renewal, they say. Angela’s remembrances mirror conversations I shared with other residents who now implored others to “remember the Fillmore,” especially during community meetings held by the Redevelopment Agency or the Navy about the redevelopment of the shipyard.

In the aftermath of urban renewal in the Fillmore, BVHP residents now view the proposed redevelopment of their neighborhood with a degree of skepticism. In meetings about the redevelopment of the old Navy shipyard in BVHP, black residents use the phrase as a warning. They use the phrase to snap meeting attendees into recalling a shared history of how urban renewal impacted black neighborhoods in the past. In neighborhood town hall meetings attended primarily by community residents, the phrase is used nostalgically, as a reminder of a time when the city’s black community was cohesive and united. It is also used in both settings as a reminder of, as Angela says, what was “lost.” The different ways that people use the phrase reveal how residents of the city’s black communities remember black space in the city. Perhaps the most important lesson underlying this warning is that black people have no real place—no roots—in the city. They remain a social problem that has been and can still be displaced. Eric, a forty-year-old black resident, illustrates this point well:
Well, definitely the urban renewal that happened in the Western Addition, I think that’s the one phenomenon that everyone can point to and say that [it] had a tremendously negative effect. I wanted to say a word—even stronger word—than negative, but that had a tremendously negative effect on the black communities here in San Francisco because: (a) it showed that a city would use eminent domain to destroy, essentially destroy, a vibrant, what was a vibrant community, however poor, a vibrant community and (b) [it sent] a signal to black people, a long-lasting symbol because it’s lasted about forty years now, a long-lasting symbol that black folk weren’t really part of this fabric [of the city] and we’ll uproot you and move you out and [offer you] great promises to move you back in if we have to.

Urban renewal did not remove all blacks from the city, but it did leave many who remained with a feeling that they were not part of the fabric of the city. A number of the black San Franciscans I spoke with shared a belief that they could be moved and shifted around at the whim of the city or the SFRA. Fillmore and BVHP community residents often view current redevelopment projects in their neighborhoods through a similar lens. In the wake of redevelopment, they are trying to rebuild a lost sense of community. Often, they do this in city meetings by asserting their voices and concerns during the public comment period. Their warnings to “remember the Fillmore” force people to critically consider the quality of life issues that accompany any redevelopment project. They use this rhetorical device to shift the focus of formal meetings from larger planning issues to the question of how redevelopment will benefit them. By doing so, poor and middle-class black residents stake a claim in their neighborhood with the hope that doing so will allow them to maintain their physical and symbolic presence in these spaces for years to come.

**Lessons from the Fillmore**

On July 21, 2010, I met Jason, a forty-four-year-old housing counselor and resident of BVHP, at his office on Third Street, a main drag that houses many of the neighborhood’s businesses. After talking about urban renewal in the Fillmore, I asked for his take on current proposals to redevelop Bayview Hunter’s Point. Jason said he initially supported the redevelopment of the shipyard because the SFRA promised not to repeat the mistakes that were made during the “redevelopment” of the Fillmore:

What was interesting is when redevelopment came back around this time they promised they would come back with no eminent domain, a more piece type of plan, than a wholesale type of plan that took place in Fillmore because they just bull[doze]ed those like square blocks [in the Fillmore]. I supported [the plan to redevelop BVHP] reluctantly [because] it prevented other developers to come in buying up stuff.
These promises of a softer, gentler redevelopment, one that was different from the redevelopment of the Fillmore, somewhat swayed Jason to support plans to redevelop the shipyard in BVHP. Yet, he is also skeptical. His family was once displaced by an urban renewal project in the neighborhood during the 1960s. He remembers the difficulties his family endured from displacement. Like other residents, his personal experience also informs his level of support for redevelopment in the area. In San Francisco, the Fillmore and Bayview-Hunter’s Point neighborhoods share a cultural connection. They also share a sense of struggle when it comes to battles in their neighborhood. Both neighborhoods became home to a large population of black workers after World War II. Yet, no matter where they lived, city residents by and large considered the influx of black migrants to be a social and civic problem. Racism, urban renewal, redlining, and other exclusionary practices shaped the trajectory of San Francisco’s black community.

Today, the Fillmore is a neighborhood that is characterized by conflict and change. It has a reputation that is associated with a history of black struggle, but it is also a neighborhood that is struggling to establish a sense of unity among its residents. Some now think of the Fillmore as a “sterile” place that has lost its connection to black culture. Since 2002, the city has tried to repackage the Fillmore’s “Harlem of the West” history in an effort to stimulate the economic viability of the neighborhood, but few longtime black residents can afford to eat at the new restaurants and clubs in the neighborhood. What once was a middle-class black area where residents owned their homes and businesses is today a highly gentrified space with high-end soul food restaurants and expensive condominiums. Some residents still wonder who is benefitting most from the redevelopment of their old neighborhood. Residents of both the Fillmore and BVHP can share stories of displacement that were associated with urban renewal projects of the past. Members of both communities were on the receiving end of broken promises. The memories of these past experiences linger and influence community decision-making today.

What lessons should city officials and urban planners learn from the history of urban renewal in the Fillmore? Two lessons jump out from my field research. First, it is important that residents have a place at the decision-making table at every phase of the process, not just in the latter stages when decisions have already been made. Second, promises of opportunities such as jobs, local hiring commitments, and low-cost housing must be kept. Residents must also be provided with relevant information in accessible ways so that they can make informed decisions about the plans for their neighborhood. Ultimately, the process should be honest, fair and inclusive. The process should heal, not make worse, the historical traumas of the past. Residents remember these experiences of exclusion and discrimination, and they draw on these memories when evaluating current attempts to renew their neighborhoods.
Notes

1 The “I” here refers to the first author, Christina Jackson. The first author’s collection of field notes and interviews forms the foundation of this analysis. Data collection was supported by an award from the University of California’s Academic Senate (“Remember the Fillmore”: A Study of Place, Change, and Healing in San Francisco, PI: Nikki Jones). The second author also conducted field research in San Francisco over a five-year period, including 30 months of continuous residence in the Fillmore neighborhood of San Francisco. The insights shared in this article are collaborative in nature. All names are pseudonyms.

2 Phelan, “Black Exodus.”


4 During this time, Jackson took up residence in the Bernal Heights neighborhood that lies between Bayview-Hunter’s Point and the Fillmore neighborhoods. This location was a twenty-minute bus ride from the Fillmore and a five-minute bus ride from Bayview-Hunter’s Point. She lived there for a total of seven months. She also made frequent visits to the city from 2008 to 2010. In addition to conducting formal in-depth interviews with twenty-three residents, she also attended town hall meetings, city government meetings, and other community meetings. From April to July of 2010, she conducted participant observation at an environmental justice organization. This allowed her to closely observe how residents understood neighborhood change. For the last year and a half of fieldwork, Christina spent most of her time in Bayview-Hunter’s Point.

5 Pepin and Watts, Harlem of the West, 13.


7 See 5th Naval District Headquarters, “Conference with Regard to Negro Personnel.”


9 Broussard, Black San Francisco, 142.


11 Mohl, 243

12 Fusfield and Bates, The Political Economy of the Urban Ghetto, 28; Massey and Denton, American Apartheid, 49; Bonacich, “Advanced Capitalism and Black/White Race Relations in the United States,” 44.


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17 Western Addition is the name of the larger geographical area that includes the Fillmore.


19 Fullilove, Root Shock, 17-19.

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22 On July 28, 2011, Governor Jerry Brown approved the AB 26 bill, which dissolved all redevelopment agencies in the state of California. Effective February 1, 2012, the San Francisco Redevelopment agency under the California Redevelopment Law was abolished and transferred over to the City and Country of San Francisco.

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