



German Village Urban Decline, Urban Renewal

Historical Context and Overview

German Village remained a working class neighborhood throughout much of the mid-20th century. Throughout the years of World War II, the city suffered from deferred maintenance because of the war effort. By the end of the war, parts of the city were falling into neglect. The federal government had growing lists of priorities—veteran housing, education and the cost of peacetime military in the perceived threat of the Cold War. Urban renewal was a new term in the 1960s and it held the promise of rebuilding downtowns with federal money.

There were real fears that urban renewal would threaten the many houses that now form part of German Village. The area, however, was never condemned as a slum, and many families who had been there from World War I remained well after World War II. Urban renewal, however, had to be able to “condemn” property as slums, but the definition of a slum was flexible.

In 1960, the German Village Society was formed with the sole purpose of saving the community. Formed under the leadership of Frank Fetch, who had restored homes in the area and saw the benefit of working house-by-house, street-by-street, the projects over the next decade were well on their way to being the largest do-it-yourself restoration in the United States, done completely without federal money. The rest of the story is well-known. The original founders of the society worked to repair their own brick streets, formed business associations, and had a vision of what could happen within 20 years.

The area became a designated National Landmark, but also a city-designated historic district which meant that architectural review of renovations and new construction had to be approved by a board before it could proceed.

Standards Alignment

Ohio’s New Learning Standards: K-12 Social Studies

Grade 3, Content Statement 3: Local communities change over time.

Grade 8, Content Statement 22: Choices made by individuals, businessmen, and governments have both present and future consequences.

HS American History, 30: The continuing population flow from cities to suburbs, the internal migrations from the Rust Belt to the Sun Belt, and the increase in immigration resulting from passage of the 1965 Immigration Act have had social and political effects.

HS American History, Content Statement 31: Political debates focused on the extent of the role of government in the economy, environmental protection, social welfare and national security.

Learning Objectives

- Discuss how local communities change over time.
- Evaluate the choices made by individuals for change as opposed to choices made by government for change.
- Explain how German Village is an example of how immigration and urbanization transformed American lives.

Discussion Questions

1. How did individuals and others make choices with regard to German Village that had consequences today?
2. Though German Village is the largest restoration of its kind in the United States without the use of federal money, how might local government money have been used in helping the restoration of German Village?
3. What factors made German Village a successful story of urban restoration? Are these factors repeatable in other communities in Columbus?
4. In what way does German Village continue to be an example of how German immigration transformed others in America?

Extension Activity

The National Housing Act of 1949 established the foundation for urban renewal. It was passed to provide “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.” Have students read President Truman’s Statement by the President Upon Signing the Housing Act of 1949 and outline the arguments Truman used in favor of urban renewal. Some critics claimed that urban renewal was merely urban removal—simply displacing poor people from their homes and forcing them to move to a new slum area. Have students write an essay or persuasive speech on the debate over urban renewal.

Additional Resources

Statement by the President Upon Signing the Housing Act of 1949
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=13246>

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