Riots long ago seeded luxury living today

By Emily Badger and Quoctrung Bui, The New York Times, July 16, 2020

“Across Washington and in other American cities, high-end development rises directly on top of Black neighborhoods that suffered the greatest damage during civil unrest decades ago.

“And there is an economic logic to it: The sheer scale of harm to Black neighborhoods — from the conditions that led to unrest, from the buildings that burned then, from the years of neglect that followed — made it easier, when the time finally came years later, for developers and new businesses and residents to amass wealth.

“In Philadelphia, apartments for college students have begun to fill the vacant lots on a strip with a storied jazz past that burned in 1964; in Miami’s Liberty City, gentrification feels just over the horizon decades after 1980 riots; in South Los Angeles, the Black population has declined significantly since the 1992 Rodney King riots.

“Far more of the Black neighborhoods nationwide that experienced unrest, or the forces that drove it, have remained in decline than have gentrified. And past unrest is no required precondition for gentrification today. But the economics that turn destruction into opportunity are most visible in these places.

“Many of these neighborhoods had bargain real estate, but also grand old housing stock, close to downtown, close to transit, with built-in commercial corridors. They also had vacant land and city-owned lots that could be assembled into larger developments.

“And because entire communities had been devalued, it was possible to redevelop at the scale of entire neighborhoods.

“As destructive as these events were, ... said [historian Robert Margo], the destruction combined with expectations that these communities would remain risky places to invest or live in. ... ‘But what is actually happening is one form of profit-making and speculation and capitalism is replacing another, with gentrification,’ said N.D.B. Connolly, a historian at Johns Hopkins University


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