



Urban renewal reshaped Te

Fifty years ago, people in Tennessee were getting excited about urban renewal and what it meant to their towns.

The phrase “urban renewal” refers to a series of programs created and financed by the federal government to combat inner-city blight and help downtowns deal with all the changes wrought by the automobile. Before urban renewal, it was not unusual for

people in Tennessee’s cities to live in densely packed shacks with no running water, no heat and unsafe wiring. It was not unusual for residential areas to be located in parts of town that regularly flooded, which led to horrible health problems. In the cities, there were entire neighborhoods in which the plumbing system consisted of water spigots in the front yard and outhouses out back. These slums had abnormally high crime and low life-expectancy rates.

Behind the idea of urban renewal was a belief that if the government removed people from such places and put them in better living arrangements, it would improve not only the peoples’ lives and self-image but also their behavior. This idealistic philosophy became common in America by the end of World War I but didn’t become a powerful force in government until President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies of the 1930s.

One of the most tangible signs of this philosophy was public housing, which was authorized by Congress in the 1930s and resulted in the construction of several public housing projects in Tennessee by the end of that decade. (Public housing refers to houses and apartments where the rent is heavily subsidized by the government.) In its early years, public housing was segregated, which is why Memphis’ first public housing project (Lauderdale Homes) was for whites only and its second public housing project (Dixie Homes) was for blacks only. After World War II, Congress extended urban renewal laws and expanded the programs. Soon municipalities across the state were working on urban renewal plans (often known as redevelopment plans).



Tennessee’s highest profile urban renewal project occurred around the Tennessee State Capitol in Nashville. Prior to the 1950s, the heavily sloped area on the north and west side of the Capitol was packed with small, blighted houses — a true “slum” by standards of the time. In the early 1950s, the state of Tennessee and the Nashville Housing Authority worked together on what was known as the

Capitol Hill Redevelopment Project, which cleared 97 acres next to the Capitol and converted it into a park and commercial and governmental corridor known as James Robertson Parkway. Today, the only signs of what used to exist along the slopes of Capitol Hill are slight indentures that indicate where roads used to exist.

Urban renewal also took hold in smaller cities, many of which used urban renewal laws to pay for public housing, new bridges and new thoroughfares. The city of Murfreesboro used urban renewal money to widen Broad Street, improve drainage and clear an area previously known as “Mink Slide.” The bypass around Shelbyville is a product of urban renewal. So is the one-way traffic system through Elizabethton.

When Charles “Bones” Seivers first became a Clinton councilman in the early 1960s, there were two urban renewal projects going on. The most significant, he says, was along Clinton’s Market Street. “Everyone complained about it while it was going on,” says Seivers, now the president and CEO of the Tennessee Municipal Bond Fund. “But when it was over, it was the most popular thing in the world. We widened the road and put in water and sewer.”

Much like highways, these urban renewal projects were mostly funded by the federal government but planned and constructed by private companies. There were so many projects to go around that some companies specialized in urban renewal. Barge Waggoner Sumner & Cannon, an engineering firm that today has offices in five Tennessee cities, rose to prominence on the back of urban renewal projects.

America’s urban renewal era ended in the 1970s. Today the organizations set up to manage urban renewal projects operate under names such as the Memphis Housing Authority and the Metropolitan (Nashville) Development and Housing Agency. Meanwhile, many people look down on the phrase “urban renewal,” believing that the massive government project failed to reduce crime and had a harsh effect on historic preservation.

Regardless of the truth, however, there are signs of the urban renewal project all over the state. For better or worse, it is a part of our history. ☺

Tennessee History for Kids



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Tennessee's cities and towns

Below, Capitol Hill in Nashville is flanked by slums before urban renewal. On the opposite page is a public housing project in the 1950s. Note that this project was for whites only.

