

The Washington Post

A Rapid Renaissance in Columbia Heights Retail-Based Renewal A Contrast to '60s Strife

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Tuesday, March 4, 2008; A01

To stand at 14th Street and Park Road in Northwest Washington is to behold a new world created at whiplash speed.

A billion dollars' worth of development, including a Target-anchored shopping center opening tomorrow, is rising in Columbia Heights, erasing the last vestiges of scars left by riots that ravaged the neighborhood 40 years ago.

And the renaissance is all by design, one intended to create a new city within the city and keep Washingtonians from traveling to the suburbs to splurge.

Even within the rush of construction that has swept across the District, Columbia Heights' renaissance is singular, not only because of its scope but because of its locale, a residential neighborhood that is among the region's most economically and racially diverse.

"What's happening in Columbia Heights, in terms of sheer magnitude of investment, is nothing like anything we've seen in our neighborhoods," said Neil O. Albert, deputy mayor for planning and economic development. "Nearly all our blockbuster projects are on large tracts of vacant land in parts of the city where few people currently live. In Columbia Heights, we're seeing literally a billion dollars' worth of development woven into a large, dense, urban neighborhood."

In addition to DC USA, the block-long mall that features Best Buy, Bed Bath & Beyond and the District's first Target, the panorama of changes includes six new apartment buildings, a 1,200-car garage, a repurposed Tivoli Theater, a dance school, a Giant supermarket and more than three dozen new restaurants, banks and shops.

As builders rediscovered the city in the 1990s, District leaders and developers gleaned a unique opportunity in the impending arrival of a Metro station in Columbia Heights within steps of seven virtually vacant parcels of land.

Because the government owned the tracts, which were bought or acquired through eminent domain after the riots, the District could control what was built, and officials could woo developers with prices that seem unimaginably low by current standards.

Grid Properties, developer of DC USA, paid \$1 million for its parcel. Donatelli & Klein, the developer of two apartment buildings, bought its lots for \$4 million. The District offered other inducements, such as financing for the new \$42 million garage at the mall.

In exchange, city and community leaders hatched a holistic vision for the individual parcels. They extracted from the developers commitments for luxury housing that would include affordable units and the kind of large-scale retail for which Washingtonians have long clamored -- all of it across from the Metro stop that opened in 1999. Donatelli agreed to share with the city 25 percent of profits generated by sales and leasing of its apartments.

Community leaders, said D.C. Council member Jim Graham (D-Ward 1), envisioned a neighborhood that would serve all residents' dining and retail needs, and include a kaleidoscope-like civic plaza for the working-class families and professionals who make up the neighborhood's population, as well as the shoppers streaming in from across the area.

"People wanted a comprehensive development -- not just apartments, but major retail," said Graham, whose ward includes Columbia Heights.

But Graham acknowledged that ginning interest was difficult in a crime-addled area defined by acres of vacant lots. "This was before the red-hot real estate market and a very different Columbia Heights," he said. "This was a neighborhood where we had tried to get McDonald's, and they said they wouldn't consider it. Today, we'd rather not have McDonald's."

Yet, even with the new construction, Graham acknowledged that Columbia Heights is still too risky for some national retailers. "They can't convince themselves that this is going to work," he said. "There is no Saks going to be located there. There is no Whole Foods."

Drew Greenwald, Grid Properties' president, also built Harlem USA, a shopping center on 125th Street in New York that contributed to that corridor's revival. The massive growth in the suburbs in recent decades, he said, has made long-neglected urban areas more attractive.

"We love projects where everyone has written off the neighborhood," he said.

Recalling his impression of Columbia Heights when he visited in the 1990s, Greenwald said he saw promise in its proximity to the Howard and Catholic university campuses, the planned Metro station and the surrounding residential population.

Columbia Heights' rebirth is not only about the arrival of bricks and mortar at a crossroads that long struggled to recover from the looting and arson that followed Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. It's about the blending of cultures and classes.

The new luxury apartments along 14th Street join the neighborhood's existing stock of subsidized housing, much of it preserved and rehabilitated by officials who feared that the poor would be forced out.

Located near the District's geographic center and bound by 16th Street and Georgia Avenue, Columbia Heights' disparate narratives play out on the neighborhood's Internet mailing list, in which one posting last month was headlined "Sushi Coming to Columbia Heights!" Another updated viewers about a late afternoon shooting.

Black residents made up just over half the neighborhood's population in the 2000 Census, although their share had declined since the previous count while the numbers of Hispanic and white people grew. From 2000 to 2005, home buyers' median income rose from \$76,000 to \$103,000, according to the Urban Institute .

The neighborhood's mix is reflected in its educational choices, which include several traditional public and charter schools, one of them bilingual; Banneker, one of the city's best-performing high schools; and Bell Multicultural Senior High, recently rebuilt for \$65 million.

"Columbia Heights potentially is the manifestation of Dr. King's vision," said William Jordan, a resident of more than 20 years. "You have the potential not just for token integration but for a critical mass of old and young, low-income and affluent."

But Jordan questioned whether that spectrum can withstand economic pressures. "Can this last longer than half a generation?" he asked.

The neighborhood's mix is what drew Carmela Clendening, 27, an aide to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.). She paid \$364,000 for a one-bedroom apartment in Kenyon Square, a new building across from Target in which units have sold for more than \$700,000.

Her mother, worried about crime, offered to help Clendening buy a pricier place in Rosslyn. But after growing up in a mostly white suburb, Clendening, who is Filipino American, chose the city because she wanted diversity. "I like how everyone's close together," she said. "I didn't want to live in Georgetown. I didn't want to live in a bubble."

The benefits of the Columbia Heights development will be felt across the city, District officials say, whether through jobs or new shopping. In the meantime, the neighborhood is adjusting to a new role as a regional destination. Residents fret about traffic and crowds, and how it will all affect the neighborhood's rhythms.

Just off 14th Street on Park Road, where two dozen or so small businesses are clustered, Ramon Compres's deli is the place for a Dominican-style lunch and a game of dominos. Julia Grabito's dusty Botanica offers incense, candles and a view of her wax-encrusted shrine to Saint Miguel.

After enduring disruptions caused by construction, they and their neighbors hope to attract the new shoppers visiting the neighborhood. But they say they need help from the city, particularly the \$2 million officials had talked of dispensing to help restore timeworn facades.

Although District officials say the money is coming, the proprietors feel shunted aside as the city celebrates the newcomers. "We've been completely ignored," Grabito said. "They fixed the neighborhood around us, but they didn't help us."

A few blocks south, in a concrete-paved park at 14th and Girard streets, talk of the neighborhood's changes can be heard at tables where men play whist and checkers. The park is across from a new condominium building and down the street from where two homicides occurred last year.

Graham has secured city funds to renovate the park, a plan that includes installing a fence that would block access at night. Although Graham said a broad spectrum of residents support the design, including park regulars, some say they feel insulted by the District's attempt to impose control over a spot they consider a second living room, and they see a connection between the fence and all the new development.

"Why separate us? Why fence off where we live?" said Sam Wilson, 51, a cook, lounging in the park one afternoon.

Gracie Rollins, a social services provider in Columbia Heights for 40 years, said the emerging neighborhood must respect longtime residents.

In the meantime, she embraces the new view from 14th Street and Park Road: condos, stores and restaurants instead of emptiness, all of it so unimaginable even five years ago. "It's like coming up to a new city, a brand-new city, that just came up out of the ground," she said. "It's a dream."