Remarks by Howard Gillette on Accepting the 2018 Visionary Historian Award from the Historical Society of Washington, D.C.
May 10, 2018

My starting point in thinking about Washington has always been that of a hinge—one forged through the “exclusive jurisdiction” of Congress. Such an arrangement is clearly a political anomaly, no less so than the electoral college, but it offers the special opportunity here for examining issues of national importance through a local lens.

Tonight I want to recognize and celebrate how we as historians owe as much to our predecessors as we might give to our successors, and as I do so I can’t help but think of this moment as another hinge: one that situates me directly between the pioneers in Washington history and those bright lights who are currently providing so much insight in their work.

_Between Justice and Beauty_ appeared 23 years ago; 33 years before that Constance Green inaugurated the modern treatment of the city with her Pulitzer-prize winning biography. Only months ago Chris Asch and Derek Musgrove published their equally majestic _Chocolate City_. Clearly, if I once carried a torch for Washington history it has passed to a new generation, whose work can only make us better informed and—most importantly—prepared to act on the lessons our history conveys.

There’s no doubt that my sensibilities lie closer to Asch and Musgrove than they ever were to Green. The practice of history changed considerably in the 1960s when Green wrote. The “Secret City” as she called the African American experience in her 1969 book, was no longer secret to the next generation of authors. And yet—I’m struck by events of the past few years—as much as we appeared to be enlightened as a nation, injustices persist, not the least in this city. That realization informs virtually every page of _Chocolate City_, prompting the authors to issue a call to action in their final pages, to “take up the challenge of black and white abolitionists, of former slaves and Radical Republicans, of civil rights and home rule activists….to build a more just, egalitarian and democratic national capital.” Clearly as long as exclusive jurisdiction survives, the political status of the city must be addressed. Green’s work, no less than that of Asch and Musgrove, revealed the all too perverse results of giving a Congress so much control over the lives of so many District residents.

For me, while such facts were uncontestable, there remained a deeper problem of perception. In _Justice and Beauty_, I felt it was important to demonstrate the powerful effect of a symbolic city that had been carved out to sit physically apart—and to a considerable degree—above that of the lived city, a split that was captured so fully in the brilliant representation of a city beautiful at the capital’s core as presented in the Smithsonian exhibit that launched the McMillan Plan of 1901-2. Only an imaginative construct at the time, the Mall’s redesign to meet the ideal gave the city the kind of stature it had been seeking throughout its early history. For millions of Americans, the core city became the capital: to visit, to venerate perhaps, yet without much regard to the undifferentiated red brick wilderness that constituted Washington’s neighborhoods where experience revealed the many contradictions that lay beyond the idealized symbols of liberty.
Between Justice and Beauty owed a good deal to my colleagues Fritz Gutheim, John Reps, Pam Scott, and Ken Bowling, for helping me better understand the idealized capital city and what it represented. More than Asch and Musgrove, I think, I believed that this representation was critical to defining Washington, but like them, I felt this cherished object of city planning had to be tied to the city’s social history and its search for justice.
Here, too, I was in debt to others. Jim Borchert has long since left Washington, and the stir his book created has been largely forgotten. But his assessment of Washington’s notorious alleyways—the home to significant numbers of the city’s black population from the era of Reconstruction into the 1950s—was revealing. While photographers had largely confirmed the negative view of such compromised living conditions, echoing Green’s own treatment of them, Borchert’s sensibility led to other conclusions. In a segregated world where poor African Americans found little sanctuary from the indignities laid on them in daily life, alleys could provide a measure of sanctuary. Borchert called such places “defensible space,” their very inaccessibility-- the cause of white anxiety-- for residents, became sites of sociability.

I saw plenty to support Borchert’s contention in combing through the meticulous photographic records of the Redevelopment Land Agency. While there were plenty of what contemporary crime analysists would call “broken windows” such conditions didn’t prevent those who found themselves marginalized in the world outside the alleyways from sharing information and forming a sense of solidarity. But it was working with Fred Miller to complete our photo history of the city, Washington Seen, that the power of photographs as evidence really came alive. It was in that work that I was fortunate to meet Godfrey Frankel.
His photographs of those in the alleys I found stunningly aesthetic but also emotional, opening a window to human experience in the past that was otherwise hard to retrieve. And there was much more. What Fred brought home to me in his brilliant excavation of imagery was to demonstrate how to widen the canvass of what could be retrieved and what it might mean.

Green’s work as well as that of others confirmed the mixed heritage of Reconstruction. No doubt, the saddest legacy was the loss of self-government as the South was “redeemed” with the end of federal control. At least—we believed—some elements of Radical Reconstruction survived, most notably in the form of an integrated transportation system.
And yet there it was—a photo Fred had dug up from sources well beyond those previously accessed—showing whites in front of a bus travelling downtown from Anacostia in 1932—while black passengers sat in the rear. We subsequently discovered from several interviews that such segregation was largely self-imposed. Indeed, one African American informant told us a wonderful story about how he would set out to make fun of such the norms by moving to the front of a bus and conspicuously removing a florid handkerchief from his immaculately tailored suit to wipe off the seat before sitting down among his disapproving passengers.
Those of us who thought we knew our history disapproved when Spencer Crew’s wonderful exhibition on black migration opened at the Smithsonian’s Museum of American History with a “whites only” sign attributed to Washington.

That simply didn’t happen in this city, we thought, and yet here was another photo Fred turned up showing just such a sign in a clinic in Georgetown. More research later revealed that this was a federal facility, and thus not bound by local norms, another reminder of how pervasive Washington’s hinge relationship with the federal government could be.
Another photographer we did not include in our book—but should have—was Joseph Curtis, a longtime resident of the Southwest who astutely warned in 1946 hearings on local legislation that would form the national model for urban renewal that a “clean sweep” of the “slum” as anticipated would create undue hardship for those who lived there.

Credit: DC Public Library

His photos, while reflecting some of the same conditions used by the Redevelopment Land Agency to justify their draconian demolition and displacement policies, revealed patterns of social standing and well-being as assets that should have been built on, not ignored.
I have never forgotten the moment Mr. Curtis spoke at the 25th anniversary of the construction of River Park Mutual Homes, the first apartment building completed in the new Southwest. A resident himself at the time, Mr. Curtis had been displaced in the 1950s, and after returning from living many years in Anacostia, he recounted how he might as well have landed on the moon—so much had been obliterated to make his old neighborhood unintelligible.

That experience of dissonance has been frequently cited in recent years as Washington has undergone a period of physical and social transformation. Describing her longtime neighborhood near the recently opened Columbia Heights Metro stop, Gloria Robinson was quoted in a 2008 Washington Post essay as saying, “I feel like I’m in another city.” Her further comment cut closer to the bone: “I get the feeling I no longer belong.”

Few such areas have received more attention than Shaw, and we can appreciate Derek Hyra’s depiction in his book Cappuccino City of changes that have provoked similar sentiments of anxiety and anger over what has been lost in a premier black neighborhood with its physical transformation.
I can sympathize with his criticism of the way historical associations have been woven into the new built fabric, even as development has drastically altered the nature of that place. Derek casts some blame on historians for bringing that history to light, through street signs and restorations such as those at the Lincoln and Howard theatres and the tours organized by DC Cultural Tourism that followed. In this, I think he misplaces blame. Blair Ruble in his book on U Street got it right, I think, when he pointed to realtors as the real commodifiers of history: “It is they” he writes, “who denuded U Street’s story of texture and meaning; it is they who have deified Duke Ellington and Langston Hughes in order to turn a profit,” (301).

At the same time, Hyra makes a critical point. For more than a generation we have presumably fought for integration. Under the influence of the Congress for New Urbanism, the reconstruction of public housing and designs to make neighborhoods more walkable and environmentally sustainable, designers have promoted mixed use development. The hope has been that such efforts might reverse the process of ghettoization described most succinctly by William Julius Wilson, of racial and class isolation. Yet as gentrification advances, we have plenty of evidence that as races come in greater proximity to one another, they remain isolated. As Hyra notes:

Most of the mechanisms by which low-income people would benefit from this change are related to social interaction—that low-, middle-, and upper-income people would start to talk to one another. They would problem solve with one another…. But what we’re really seeing is a micro-level segregation. You see diversity along race, class, sexual orientation overall, but when you get into the civic institutions—the churches, the recreation centers,
the restaurants, the clubs, the coffee shops—most of them are segregated. So you're not getting a meaningful interaction across race, class, and difference.

It’s in such circumstances of change that we need more, not less presence of historians in the communities they write about. As Howard University professor Natalie Hopkinson wrote reflecting on a DC Historical Society panel she participated in last year, “Change, of course, is the most organic thing about cities…But change without respect for the past is pernicious.” Recounting the lack of interest among new newcomers to her neighborhood to the stories that had animated that place for so long, she added, “The stories about the lives here are the most precious resource we have.” (NYT 5/12/17) Such stories don’t survive if those who remember them depart unwillingly and without respect for their legacy. Clearly, without interaction, not just memory is lost but the chance to bring desirable social changes together with physical renewal. Such change is merely Southwest renewal in a different guise.

I have believed throughout my career that the practice of history provides a safe space for confronting and engaging difficult issues. But let’s not fool ourselves. These are difficult times. What Kathy Smith and her colleagues did in many forms, to extend historical awareness into communities across the city was terrific.

Credit: Howard Gillette

Such efforts apparently continue, as I was glad to witness this tour for white college students when I was in Shaw in March. But it’s hard to believe that even our best efforts are sufficient to
the needs of the time. We do have opportunities to meet the challenge here, however, and I want to suggest two to begin with.

First, why not turn the national hinge to our advantage? For years the Mall has attracted visitors the world over. Now, with the powerful presence of the African American Museum of History and Culture added to the mix, why not make the connection there overt with the nearby “Chocolate city?” An exhibit based on Derek and Chris’s book would both enrich the national story and serve as a gateway for visitors to the lived and not just the symbolic city immediately in view. And maybe—just maybe—those visitors might realize how unacceptable the disfranchisement of some 700,000 people only blocks away really is!

Second, we are experiencing a Guttenberg moment. Our ways of telling stories, especially in print, are being challenged in the digital age. Are there additional ways the powerful stories and evocative images of the journal *Washington History* and associated programs might be amplified? Much of what happens daily cries out for historical context.

Credit: PhiladelphiaEncyclopedia.org

In Philadelphia, we have been experimenting with an on-line Encyclopedia by providing links with the public media outlet WHYY’s Newsworks, in addition to providing immediate content to tourists using their phones or visiting museums as well as scholars seeking more information in archives. We have called our work community-based history, and the larger goal is to generate shared knowledge that transcends both a fractured region and the fractured media environment that serves it.

As much as this seems a hinge moment in so many ways, not the least the transition from a majority black city, the past remains very much with us. In October, 2015 Petula Dvorak wrote
a column for the Post regretting the ways African Americans in Washington have been marginalized in recent years. As she complained about how difficult it was to shop in latte city—referring to reports that whites have been using a special app to identify suspicious people in stores, 90% of whom were black—who among historians could forget the unwritten rule that African Americans could buy clothing but not try it on first?

Credit: DC Department of Housing and Community Development

As we see professed ideals of liberty and equality tested in these difficult times, there is so much of Washington’s conflicted history to learn from. My hope is that the stellar historical work now being done here will only continue to grow in reach as well as in depth. We’ll differ in our choice of subjects and our interpretations. But we must do our best to achieve clarity, casting our gaze sympathetically yet critically at our heritage. For the many people in this room who have helped me in that enterprise, I offer my deepest gratitude. To those both supporting and taking up
that task, I wish you insight and wisdom, for you are the hope of a better, and, as Ash and Musgrove put it, a more just future.

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