

To Revitalize a Community

By Nina Lam

Third place: Researched Argument (UNIV 111/112)

Redlining—the practice of denying borrowers access to credit based on the location of properties in minority or economically disadvantaged neighborhoods (Mitchell). In the 1930's, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) assigned neighborhoods in major American cities “grades” in what they called “Residential Security” maps. These grades ranged from “A” or “Best” to “D” or “Hazardous.” Despite being officially banned under the *Fair Housing Act of 1968*, redlining has created a “concentrated pocket of poverty in the East end” (Mitchell), specifically Richmond's Church Hill North, a predominantly Black neighborhood. “D” grade neighborhoods, historically minority communities, were labeled “risky” for investment, reinforcing racial division by allowing investors to establish segregated neighborhoods. Due to Richmond's population growth following 1850, the original street names, lettered alphabetically from A-Z, were named following alliteration. However, the streets in the Church Hill neighborhood were never officially fully renamed, and M-Y remain one letter streets, reflective of the city's misplaced focus to improve living conditions for present residents before considering new attractions in traditionally privileged areas. Renaming the streets of Richmond's Church Hill North neighborhood inspires community reclamation and empowers the Black residents who live and work there. Leaving Churchill North's streets unnamed only continues to perpetuate its residents' inequity, “their intractable problems” of inaccessibility to affordable housing, healthcare, and a safe learning environment.

Michael Paul William's article, “We remain two Richmonds” proclaims the “Twin Cities” as gentrified “RVA” and forgotten “Richmond.” Whilst one city is “blossoming,” the other is

“decaying.” This brings up the ethical standard of the Common Good approach. According to the definition from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, this approach assumes that the community is in itself good, and that “respect and compassion for all others” and “conditions that are important for the welfare of everyone” are required. For example, public healthcare complies to this standard because in theory it is inclusive and benefits all people. The duality of “RVA” and “Richmond” violates this standard because the community is divided and there is a disparity in the quality of life between neighborhoods affected by redlining, such as Church Hill North, compared to highly developed areas such as The Fan, a district in close proximity to VCU. The inaccessibility to basic needs such as grocery stores or healthcare distinguishes Black and other minority residents of poverty-stricken neighborhoods, from residents living in grade “A” neighborhoods. Considering East end’s single letter street names are still “frozen in time” (Williams), it is clear that “Richmond” is in dire need of attention from city officials to address many aspects of its “lagging.”

According to Shekinah Mitchell’s 2019 essay “In Richmond, Virginia, Gentrification Is Colonization,” many Black families are being displaced from their homes due to inflated rent. Despite growing up in the East End, Mitchell and her husband have been forced to live “at four different addresses in five years,” paying “more in rent for fewer square footage.” Mitchell also cites that “60% of Richmond’s public housing units fall within ... the East end,” leading to decreased political influence as there is “only one city council member and school board representative” for the area. Mitchell concludes that instead of improvements for current residents, lower-income Black people are being replaced by “wealthier white people.” If the streets remain unnamed and the area otherwise ignored, Richmond’s decay will continue to

decrease alongside the population of Black residents. This would directly oppose community reclamation and ethical treatment of all groups accordingly.

In a 2020 interview led by Maria Godoy, 61 year old resident Torey Emonds described her neighborhood from childhood to adulthood, noting how its “rose bushes, fruit trees, and... access to... several grocery stores” eroded over time to lack “real food.” Godoy notes that as banks continued to reject loans, “houses fell into disrepair,” snowballing into the steady withdrawal of access to “healthy food” from grocery stores, “parks and other green spaces” to exercise, and “more exposure to pollution,” all of which lead to “poorer health conditions.” Furthermore, “formerly redlined areas have less tree cover” and “more paved surfaces, like roads and parking lots, that absorb and radiate heat” (Plumer & Povich). This leads to a “5 to 15 degree” difference on average between redlined and greenlined Richmond neighborhoods. Godoy also includes a table of statistics, noting that there is “more than a 20-year difference” in life expectancy of the resident’s of Edmond’s neighborhood compared to its wealthier counterparts. Plumber and Povich’s article provides evidence of the long term effects of redlining on the poor health of East end residents, alongside their inaccessibility to the proper resources to better sustain themselves. Renaming the streets of Church Hill North increases the area’s significance to the city by raising it to the same name standard as the wealthier areas. This in turn encourages prioritization of the community’s need for better resources and city planning to improve the quality of life.

Henry L. Marsh III. Elementary School, formerly George Mason Elementary School, was renamed and rebuilt in 2020. Prior to its name and location change, it was known as “the worst of the worst: the Richmond Public Schools building in the most dire shape” (Williams). During his tour of the school in its original state, Williams disclosed that the staff have “donned masks to

ward off the fumes” of the school’s “gas-fired boilers,” which was no doubt a health and safety hazard for the entire building. Other details about the school included “rat droppings, leaking bathrooms, and unexplained illnesses” (Evans). Although productive learning is not determined solely by the teaching environment, a poor facility greatly limits the capacity of students to succeed. Students already deal with the “poverty and trauma” of living in Church Hill North, and the violence that breeds out of the poor condition of the area’s housing followed them to school in the form of a “decrepit” learning facility (Williams). The formerly abysmal conditions of the school specified by Williams and Evans exemplify the desperate need for funding and improvement of public facilities in the East end. The renaming of the school for Richmond’s first Black mayor foreshadows the potential advancement of Church Hill North, following the renaming of its streets, as it is living proof that reclamation is power to the people and their demands.

Renaming the streets of Church Hill North plays a role in “humanizing” these areas in the eyes of officials because they would no longer be numbers in a grid, letters on a list, or tasks to check off once they are deemed acceptable. Names give personality to these areas, become habitual through prolonged use by residents, and shift power dynamics through honoring activists for racial justice or notable Black educators and other public figures. Examples for M and V street are Maggie L. Walker and Virginia Randolph respectively. Walker was the first African-American woman to found a bank, and was renowned as a “business woman and community leader” whose achievements “offered tangible improvements for ... African Americans and women” (National Park Service). Randolph, born in Richmond, was a highly celebrated teacher known for her contributions to education through improvement of facility conditions and curriculum. The significance of these Black women in American history qualify

them as candidates for memorialization in Richmond, especially for their impact on the communities they aimed to improve, and their focus on creating conditions that addressed the welfare of “especially the vulnerable” (Markkula Center).

For the entirety of its history, America and white people have violently discriminated, appropriated, colonized, and gentrified spaces that do not belong to them whilst othering groups they have deemed “inferior.” Until the needs of the oppressed are addressed, the cycle of neglect and thinly-veiled racist legislation will continue to displace socio-economically disadvantaged groups of people, such as the Black community in Church Hill North. It is extremely important to acknowledge Richmond’s divide and the imbalance of its two sides because acknowledgement is power. If these streets remain unnamed, the community’s history, pain, and needs will remain “unnamed” as well. Although the effects of redlining can not possibly be resolved just through the act of officially renaming streets, it is the start of a movement with a focus on improving the livelihoods of social structures and systems for those existing and suffering in the present. A clean slate is impossible, but revitalization is the closest thing to justice, and the key is in the voices of the people.

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