Imagining a Past Future

Photographs from the Oakland Redevelopment Agency

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Children watch as a house is bulldozed in West Oakland, June 12, 1968.

On any given workday in downtown Oakland, thousands of commuters enter and exit the 12th Street City Center station of the Bay Area Rapid Transit, or BART, rushing past a large bronze bust of John B. Williams. The statue, like many memorials, fails to meet its mission: to remind Oakland's residents who John B. Williams was and what role he played in the city that named its downtown plaza and part of its intercity highway for him. The charismatic director of the Oakland Redevelopment Agency from 1964 to 1976, Williams was once called the most "powerful and effective Black man in city government."[1] Lionel Wilson, Oakland's first Black mayor, has noted that before his own election in 1977, Williams had been considered a potential mayoral candidate.[2] He is now difficult to locate in the public record and in the public imagination. But like the bust at City Center Plaza, his legacies hide in plain sight. Williams's story is central to the history not only of this particular place but also of many communities upended by the urban renewal programs of the mid-20th century.

In 1949, the federal government passed the Housing Act, making funds for urban renewal projects available to many American city governments. Oakland undertook a program of aggressive redevelopment, redlining vulnerable working-class communities to make way for new infrastructure and industry.[3] The city's African-American community, which had tripled in population in the decades before and after World War II, was disproportionately affected.[4] Racialized housing restrictions confined the majority of this growing community to overcrowded West Oakland — just west of downtown — where the housing stock was increasingly becoming derelict.

A postwar housing crisis brought on by the influx of migrants and loss of wartime jobs resulted in deeply segregated residential neighborhoods across the East Bay.[5] Traditionally multi-ethnic communities (including Mexican, Asian, Portuguese, and Irish families) were transformed as white Oaklanders took advantage of federal loan and mortgage programs — subsidized by the Federal Housing Administration and the Veteran's Administration — to purchase new homes in the suburbs. Meanwhile, due to discriminatory lending practices, racist zoning laws that

restricted African Americans to neighborhoods west of Oakland's Adeline Street, and low owner-occupancy rates, homes in and around downtown fell into disrepair. This devaluation of property — specifically in West Oakland — coupled with the decline of the city's commercial district, created anxiety for local officials, who felt especially threatened by the commercial pull of San Francisco following the completion of the Bay Bridge in 1936. In 1959, a sweeping redevelopment plan for West Oakland was unanimously approved by the city council.

KTVU News footage featuring an interview with Oakland's Mayor John Reading and Oakland Redevelopment Agency director John B. Williams, 1966. [Courtesy Bay Area TV Archive, San Francisco State University]

Phase I of Oakland's program, The General Neighborhood Renewal Plan, or GNRP, called for "extensive renewal" in the Acorn neighborhood. The area had been home to an estimated 500 primarily low-income families (78 percent African American, 20 percent Mexican American, and 2 percent White) living in some 600 dwellings.[6] According to a report by the redevelopment agency, 80 percent of Acorn's 4,300 residents were housed in substandard conditions. In 1962, despite protest from residents, the entire 34-acre neighborhood was bulldozed. Then, for more than five years, the site sat empty, overgrown with weeds.[7]

"City administrators spoke as if renewal and redevelopment were synonymous," writes Robert Self in *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. "But local residents knew the difference between low-interest loans and bulldozers: the former meant restoration and community improvement, the latter symbolized what became widely known nationwide as 'Negro Removal.'"[8] With Acorn being demolished just blocks away, residents of nearby Oak Center, which was slated for Phase II of the GNRP, organized to oppose the destruction of their community. A 50-block area north of Acorn, Oak Center had more middle-class homeowners than Acorn, and less degraded housing stock than the adjacent neighborhood.[9] It also had Lillian Q. Love, a long-time West Oaklander whose father had unsuccessfully fought his family's displacement in the 1930s, during the construction of the

Peralta Villa public housing complex. In 1963, Love co-founded the Oak Center Neighborhood Association, a homeowners' organization that lobbied the city to fund housing rehabilitation rather than demolition and redevelopment; in 1966 she was named a commissioner of the Oakland Redevelopment Agency. Meanwhile the neighborhood association accused the first director of the Redevelopment Agency, Thomas Bell, of purposely misleading Oak Center residents regarding the agency's plans, and Bell resigned under pressure from the federal Urban Renewal Administration. It was in these heated political circumstances, in the devastating aftermath of Acorn's destruction, that John B. Williams arrived in Oakland.

Downtown Oakland, January 24, 1969.

John Bentley Williams was born in 1917 in Covington, Georgia, the son of a Baptist minister. He earned a bachelor's degree in fine art at the Cleveland Institute of Art, served in the U.S. Army from 1946 to 1948, and worked as a graphic artist for the *Pittsburgh Courier* before being hired as a planner for the city of Cleveland. He remained there nine years, eventually heading the Division of Urban Renewal. He also ran his own advertising and public relations firm.

Williams assumed his position as the director of the Oakland Redevelopment Agency on September 1, 1964, and remained in the job until his death from an aggressive cancer at age 59. "I do not pretend to come before you as the Messiah with a glib promise that urban renewal and Redevelopment is the cure-all for the problems and ills of Oakland," he told constituents at his first public presentation, three months after his arrival. "We will either move forward or slide backwards — there is no standing still."[10] Williams was a bureaucrat, but he was also an ambitious urbanist. He believed in Oakland's unique potential — in the city's capacity to reshape itself into a 21st-century metropolis, as well as to support his own pursuits. His wife Valena, a public radio producer and broadcaster, observed that her husband had left Cleveland "because it was becoming clear that he was not going to become the top person there," despite the fact that "he was doing all the work, all the dreaming and all the planning."[11] A forceful champion for affirmative action policies, Williams was the first city official to enforce minority training-and-hiring policies, requiring that ORA employ laborers and award contracts proportionate to city demographics. He was also a leading member of the New Oakland Committee, which brought labor, business, and minority groups together to found First Enterprise Bank, the first minority-owned bank in Northern California.

Urban renewal has become synonymous with racist zoning and lending practices of the sort that Oakland witnessed, and which, nationwide, led to white flight and targeted inner-city communities that remained economically weak and politically disenfranchised despite the country's postwar boom. Perhaps it is this ugly history that has prevented Williams's name and legacy from carrying forward into the 21st century. We have inherited a polarized historical narrative that pits heartless redevelopment agencies against the helpless residents of the communities they destroyed. But Williams's efforts as director of ORA — and the copious documentation his administration left behind — give us an opportunity to complicate that story.

With his fine-art training, Williams invested heavily in the power of images to communicate with city residents regarding the treatment of dilapidated buildings and the status of neighborhood development projects. His staff included full-time photographers and a graphic designer, who worked in tandem to document neighborhoods designated as "in decay," and to present those communities with visual materials — brochures, pamphlets, models, and traveling displays — that explicated and promoted relocation and redevelopment programs.

Relocation Questions and Answers pamphlet from ORA, 1968; presentation of funds for construction of the new Martin Luther King Elementary School in the Acorn neighborhood, 1969.

The Acorn and Oak Center projects were not ORA's only large-scale undertakings during Williams's tenure. Entire blocks in downtown Oakland were demolished and rebuilt; residential hotels in Chinatown were rehabilitated; Laney College was erected; and swathes of West Oakland beyond Acorn were torn down to make way for industrial buildings, highways, a U.S. Post Office processing center, and the lines and stations of the new BART. All these changes were diligently documented by William's staff, resulting in a photographic archive of about 30,000 images that depict Oakland before, during, and after its most intense period of transformation. Even after Williams's death, the agency maintained a staff photographer to catalogue ongoing projects. It wasn't until 2012, when Governor Jerry Brown dissolved the redevelopment agencies statewide, that the documentation ceased.

In 2016, I was introduced to a public information officer in the Oakland Planning and Zoning department, which had inherited the ORA materials. City Hall was being renovated, and Planning and Zoning personnel were under pressure to remove the photographs from the building. As an archivist, I immediately recognized the value of the collection, and volunteered to organize the photographs and shepherd the archive through its relocation to the History Room in the main branch of the Oakland Public Library.

I live in West Oakland and every day travel the streets that were remade by John B. Williams's agency. In fact, while cataloguing the photographs, I came across a shot of my own house, and was surprised to see an empty lot beside it — where a condominium now stands — and a large home on the far side of my neighbor's house, where there is now an empty lot. Peering into the image, I see a woman standing below my front steps and a small child in a fur-lined coat looking expectantly around the corner.

Author's house, far right, in West Oakland, undated.

As the photographs show, the blight was real. Yet I have grown wary of declension narratives that strip agency from the people whose lived experience these photographs document. Racial inequality has long been pervasive in the United States, and redevelopment projects purposefully and disproportionately affected non-white, and particularly African-American, communities. Misdirected efforts to remake cities were met mostly with resistance, though collaboration happened sometimes too. These struggles led to complex interactions that in turn reshaped cities and formed new urban identities. The painful legacy of urban renewal era consists of more than ruined neighborhoods and bad architecture. Resistance movements, public-service programs, non-profit agencies, and community-advocacy groups like Lillian Q. Love's Oak Center Neighborhood Association belong to this history too.

Oakland, today, of course remains contested space. Tech-industry expansion pushing north from Silicon Valley has extended the San Francisco real estate market into the East Bay, and cries of foul regarding gentrification — that overused term encompassing physical displacement, cultural dilution, financial disenfranchisement — are heard daily. On my first pass through the photo collection, I spent months in the offices of the Oakland Planning Department. This period witnessed two major fires in the city: one, the probable result of arson at a construction site, dislocated more than 100 people; the other, at an underground performance space in a warehouse rife with code violations, killed 36. From the 3rd floor of the Oakland Public Library, where I continue to sort the thousands of images, I can now count at least four construction cranes looming over the skyline. Homelessness in the Bay Area is visible in unprecedented ways and, according to U.S. Census data, Oakland's African-American population has decreased 25 percent since 2000.

What might we learn about this present, and the future it portends, from examination of the recent past? The following gallery of photographs is culled from the first 400 rolls of film in the Oakland Redevelopment Agency archive, all black-and-white 35mm shot between 1965 and 1970, most likely by the agency's first staff photographer, Harry Wade. One of the agency's subsequent photographers, Marcia Nowak (who retired in 2005), graciously helped to identify some of these images. As she explained, "We took pictures of everything." The agency selected photos to use in its promotional materials, but it did not limit what its photographers captured.[12] Many of the projects documented in this collection failed. But the photographs presented here are not an attempt to indict the Oakland Redevelopment Agency. The rich photographic record allows us to explore myriad visual narratives, including those that did not serve the city's interests at the time. It is up to us to revisit these images, and to see what else they have to say.

SLIDESHOW *John B. Williams with City Center model, 1964.* *

Early in his tenure at the Oakland Redevelopment Agency, John B. Williams was photographed by an ORA staff photographer with a highly speculative model for a possible "new Oakland." The Oakland-based *California Voice* quoted Williams as inviting city officials and residents to "take your imagination and stretch it with me to see the Oakland of the future."**

* Note: In captioning these images, I have kept as close as possible to the original language in the

archive.

** Williams quoted in Brian C. Gitta, III, "John B. Williams' Vision for Oakland," *California Voice* (Oakland), March 4, 1988.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Many people made this essay possible. Diane Curry at the Hayward Area Historical Society introduced me to the collection through Harry Hamilton and Annalee Allen, public program officers for the City of Oakland. Harry and Annalee were longtime stewards of these photographs and trusted their care and organization to me. Betty Marvin, City of Oakland planner and historian, provided architectural and historical context. At UC Santa Barbara, professors Alice O'Connor, Paul Spickard, and Randy Bergstrom, along with PhD candidate Rana Razek, offered feedback on early research. CSU Sacramento professors Anne Lindsay and Paula Austin extended an opportunity to present the collection at the CSUS Graduate Student Research Symposium. Lastly, Dorothy Lazard, librarian and historian in the Oakland History Room at the Oakland Public Library, accepted the photographs into the collection, providing a place for me to work as well as historical and personal insights as a true daughter of Oakland. I dedicate this article to her.

NOTES

1. "Redevelopment Chief Williams Dies at 59," *The Montclarion* (Oakland), October 20, 1976. ↩
2. "Lionel Wilson: Attorney, Judge, and Oakland Mayor," interview by Gabrielle Morris. UC History Digital Archives, 1992. ↩
3. The term "redlining" was coined in 1960 by sociologist John McKnight to describe the practice of denying services, such as real-estate financing and insurance, based on a community's racial or ethnic composition. Residential maps produced by the federally sponsored Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) coded neighborhoods by color based on their assumed desirability for buyers; "Type D" neighborhoods, which were

primarily African American, were considered hazardous and colored red. See Amy E. Hiller, "Redlining and the Homeowners' Loan Corporation," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 29, no. 4 (May 2003), 394-420. ↩

4. See Marilynn S. Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). ↩
5. De facto discrimination against African-American homeownership in California was supposed to be addressed through the 1963 Rumford Fair Housing Act. However, in 1964, California voters ratified Proposition, re-legalizing the right of property owners to discriminate against renters. Passage of Proposition 14 lead to the loss of federal housing funding for the state, and the measure was repealed in 1974 via passage of Proposition 7. ↩
6. Chris Rhomberg, *No There There: Race, Class, and Political Community in Oakland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). ↩
7. The Acorn Projects were completed in 1974. Occupancy plummeted due to ongoing gang violence and, in 1995, the city demolished and rebuilt the entire complex. See Rick DelVecchio, "HUD May Raze or Revamp West Oakland's Acorn Apartments," *San Francisco Chronicle East Bay Bureau*, February 17, 1995. ↩
8. Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 140. ↩
9. Rhomberg, 131. ↩
10. Bob Heisey, "City Welcomes Renewal Director," *Oakland Tribune*, December 2, 1964. ↩
11. Brian C. Gitta, III. "John Williams' Vision for Oakland," *California Voice* (Oakland), March 4, 1988. ↩
12. Interview with Marcia Nowak by the author, Oakland (December 22, 2016). ↩

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