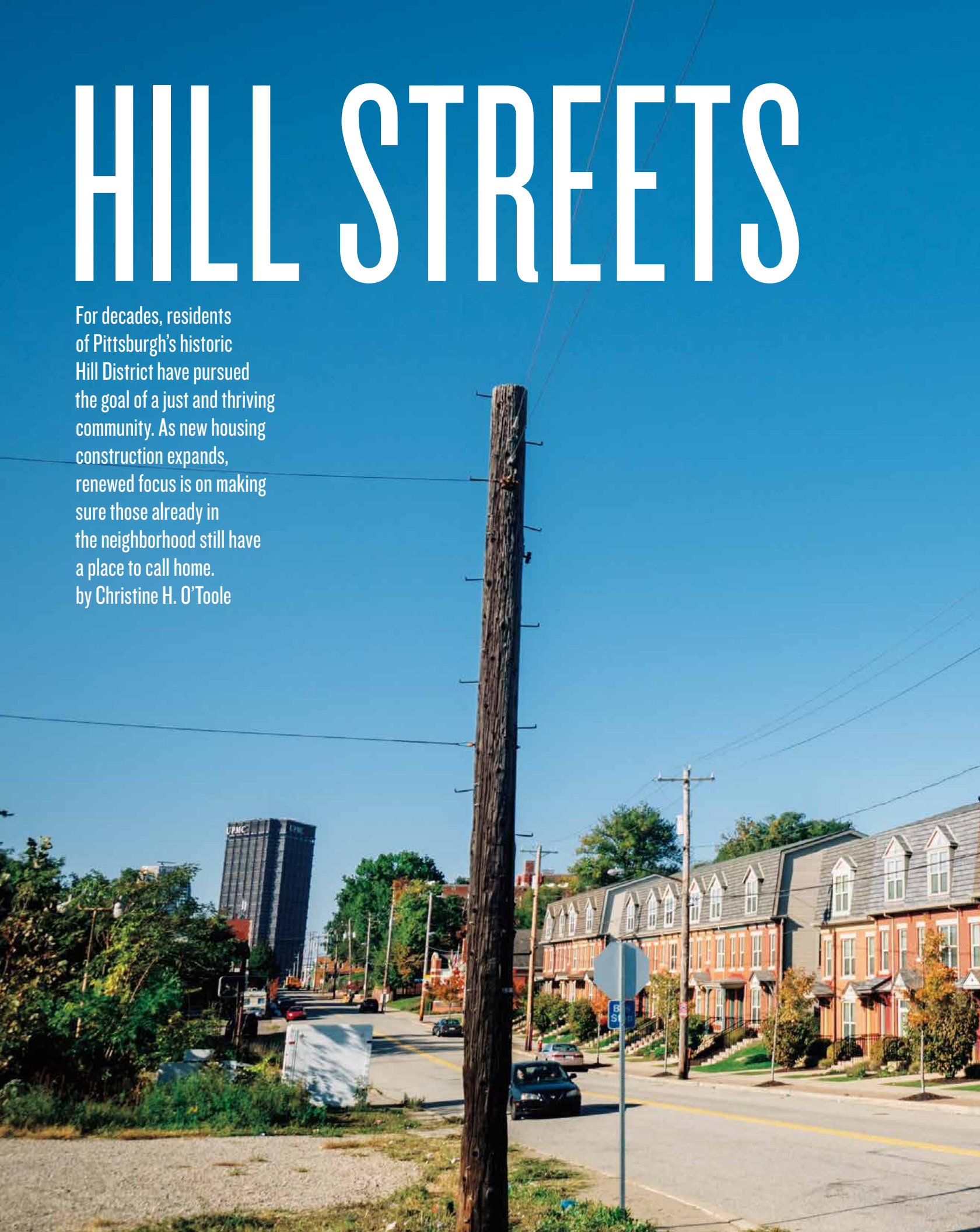


HILL STREETS

For decades, residents of Pittsburgh's historic Hill District have pursued the goal of a just and thriving community. As new housing construction expands, renewed focus is on making sure those already in the neighborhood still have a place to call home.
by Christine H. O'Toole





The Bedford Hill apartment complex is among the new housing in the Hill District. But as this corner at Bedford Avenue and Kirkpatrick Street shows, additional redevelopment is still needed nearby and elsewhere in the community.



The Hill District's housing landscape ranges from Bedford Dwellings, Pittsburgh's oldest public housing complex, to Skyline Terrace, below, a development that replaced other public housing and has a hilltop view of the city's South Side neighborhood.

“WELCOME [TO] BEDFORD DWELLINGS,” PROCLAIMS A FADED WOODEN SIGN WHERE BEDFORD AVENUE BEGINS ITS WESTWARD PLUNGE TOWARD THE SKYSCRAPERS OF DOWNTOWN PITTSBURGH.



A block downhill, the name Bedford Hill is engraved in concrete on an elegant community center fronting well-groomed streets and sidewalks.

The two communities bookend 80 years of redevelopment in the city's most iconic African American neighborhood, with Bedford Dwellings, the oldest of the city's public housing complexes, finally at the front of the line for a major revamp.

Gail Felton, a Bedford Dwellings resident, is among those enthusiastic about proposals for the neighborhood makeover and the opportunity she had to participate in the planning process.

"The best thing about it is the homes," she said. "TREK Development is fantastic," referring to a developer working with Bedford residents and other neighborhood and city stakeholders. Ms. Felton also appreciates the options for private ownership, which include both market-rate and affordable homes for the community.

Although the Hill has always had the best views in town, even when some of its residential streets were unpaved, its steep terrain challenged optimal development.

For decades, connecting the neighborhood a mile to the nearby Downtown or Oakland business districts has meant facing physical and psychological barriers, though efforts to overcome some obstacles—such as creating a park between the Hill and Downtown—are underway.

"What's amazing about Pittsburgh is its topography, but it makes the Hill District area inaccessible," said architect Kai-Uwe Bergmann, who has consulted on proposals to develop the section of the neighborhood closest to Downtown and reconnect the Hill to the urban core. "You can't push a baby carriage or a wheelchair up a 14 percent slope."

Acres of gleaming townhomes have replaced barracks-style rental properties over the past 30 years. But the Hill's isolation from the larger community remains real and vexing, especially when trying to ensure that current residents benefit from the changes and are treated fairly.

"The Hill District doesn't want to be East Liberty or Lawrenceville," said Bill Generett, vice president of community engagement for nearby Duquesne University, identifying neighborhoods that have boomed in recent years but have priced out former residents.

"We want to make sure there are jobs and opportunities for current residents, and to find the right mix of market and affordable housing," noted the longtime Hill District advocate. "It's difficult."

For Rob Stephany, director of Community & Economic Development for The Heinz Endowments, the difficulty is ensuring equitable development that secures the fate of long-term renters who often aren't included in local redevelopment strategies.

"The issue moving forward is developing long-term housing for those vulnerable to economic displacement while making new housing available to others," he said.

Many are hoping for better results from the Bedford Dwellings/Hill District Choice Neighborhood Transformation plan, based on a two-year community process that invited residents like Ms. Felton and neighborhood organizations to reimagine large sections of the Hill. Not only does the strategy call for keeping current Bedford Dwellings residents in the neighborhood while the complex is redeveloped, the plan also identified other community aspirations for the Hill and those living there.

The consensus is that affordable housing alone can't provide the stable community and economic mobility local residents seek. Private investment, good transit, commercial activity, great schools, and efficient human services also are needed for the community to achieve its potential.

NEW HOUSING, NEW PROMISE

Reaching these goals requires overcoming a history of disinvestment and displacement going back to Depression-era Pittsburgh. That's when a number of Hill District residents had good blue-collar jobs, many in the steel industry, but didn't have housing.

A shortage estimated at 10,000 homes forced families into slums.

When Franklin Roosevelt signed the National Housing Act in 1937, Pittsburgh built two of the nation's first public housing complexes in the Hill, Bedford Dwellings and Addison Terrace. The Housing Authority of Pittsburgh set rents from \$18 to \$23 a month, at a time when the average steelworker's pay was \$36 a month. Working families were encouraged to apply, alongside the unemployed. Locally and nationally, public housing was viewed as a temporary home.

As more families—particularly white ones—fled the Hill for the post-war suburbs, the economic and racial diversity of the neighborhood dwindled. The wholesale razing of the Lower Hill to make room for the Civic Arena exacerbated the neighborhood's decline. Rebellions following the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. felled its remaining business district. It would take another quarter-century for the city to move forward with plans in the Hill for a New Urbanist development dubbed Crawford Square, located near the arena.

New Urbanism envisioned walkable communities with streets and sidewalks that encouraged higher densities, mixed uses, public transit, and protected green space. Instead of low-slung apartments without individual doorways, designs featured private entries, patios and balconies.

Crawford Square redefined affordable housing for the city. A public-private partnership created a variety of affordable and mixed-rate townhouse rentals and private homes in the mid-1990s, close to Downtown amenities and transit.

"We bought in 1999," recalled DeWitt Walton, a homeowner who is a labor activist and Allegheny County council member. "It was centrally located, affordable, and we were committed to living in an African American community."

Today, Crawford Square is a successful and stable model for mixed-rate housing. Now wholly owned by developer

McCormick Baron Salazar, it has preserved 148 of its 348 units as affordable-rate housing. Families own another 72 homes.

“It brought people back to the community. That was a plus,” Ms. Felton explained.

But other sections of the Hill District did not fare as well during the close of the last century. Among the neighborhoods-within-the-neighborhood—Bedford Dwellings, Terrace Village, Crawford Roberts, the Upper Hill, the Middle Hill and the Lower Hill—the Middle Hill has the city’s highest rates of poverty, vacant homes, and vacant land. While the handsome, new affordable developments like Oak Hill and Skyline Terrace have supplanted former public housing complexes, vacant homes and deteriorating apartments like Bedford Dwellings are a barrier to sustainable transformation in the Middle Hill.

The Bedford Dwellings/Hill District Choice plan focuses on redeveloping Bedford Dwellings, a substantial portion of the Middle Hill, and a small section of Crawford Roberts. The Endowments committed \$50,000 to support the planning process. The work was folded into what was called the Bedford Connects proposal that was submitted to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The city hopes to win a \$30 million grant for the \$250 million project, which includes 320 new housing units. The city’s Larimer neighborhood won the same grant for a similarly comprehensive plan in 2014. Now the Hill District, having been the subject of several ambitious redevelopment proposals and projects, is hoping that the city’s intentions for commercial development in the part of the neighborhood closest to Downtown and for bus rapid transit through the Hill will dovetail with the community-developed plan.

NEIGHBORHOOD COMMITMENT

Ms. Felton, 66, has lived the history of the Hill. As a child, she had the run of Wylie Avenue, then a busy retail and cultural center. “Children were never allowed there by themselves, but my parents both worked on the street,” she recalled.

Her father ran a meat market; she joined her mother, a waitress at the famed Crawford Grill nightclub, for lunch each day. Her neighbors from nearby Whiteside Street still gather for summer reunions, which drew more than 300 old friends back to the neighborhood this year. In 1980, she moved to Bedford Dwellings. She is not only the decade-long president of the tenant council but also a vigilant community guardian. Three generations of her family live in the aging complex, with long barracks-style units facing bare lawns or parking lots.

“Why do I stay? It’s community,” she said. “People left the Hill for better schools and good homes. I say stay here and fight for those things. Better this community.”

Energy-efficient, free of mold and lead contamination, and surrounded by gardens and recreation opportunities, the new units under the Bedford Dwellings/Hill District Choice plan will follow the lead of next-door neighbor Bedford Hill Apartments, which opened in 2007 under public-private management. Individuals and families who moved there found a handsome complex that offered spacious, air-conditioned units, fitness and business centers, modern floor plans and green space.

For Marcus L. Brown, Bedford Hill was a good fit. At age 43, he has multiple sclerosis and is unable to work full-time; some 45 percent of his fellow residents are also disabled. When a vacancy for an ADA-compliant apartment came up, only a month after he joined the waiting list in 2009, he moved from East Liberty to Bedford Hill. Despite relying on a walker and ACCESS transit, he can easily navigate the hallways of his ground-floor home and the sidewalks of the community.

“I was born in East Liberty and I bleed East Liberty,” said Mr. Brown, who still misses his family home, razed in that neighborhood’s makeover 15 years ago. “But I’m blessed to be here.”

As plans for replacing the old Bedford Dwellings units emerge, some skeptics have wanted to know whether families living in the complex will be forced to move before

the new units are built. That’s been the case in just about every other affordable housing redevelopment project in the city, where residents were asked to leave substandard housing and promised the opportunity to return once new housing was built. But most never came back.

“Life gets in the way,” explained Mr. Stephany of the Endowments. “Families settle into new schools and new neighborhoods and only a very small fraction return. Regrettably, they often move to places that separate them from family, schools, social supports, transportation assets and job centers. The old development model might generate some housing units, but it more often than not puts low-income, vulnerable families in more precarious situations.”

Bedford Dwellings, however, has room to grow. Construction of new units could start immediately on nearby vacant land.

“The big idea here is ‘build first,’” said Bill Gatti, president of TREK Development.

As units are completed, residents are guaranteed one-for-one replacement of federally subsidized housing onsite or offsite nearby. This means instead of being forced to move outside of the community with small likelihood of returning, families are only relocated once and are able stay within the neighborhood.

BEYOND HOME CONSTRUCTION

As Crawford Square and subsequent Hill redevelopments followed the New Urbanist template, one feature was notably absent: buildings that incorporated retail offerings at ground level, encouraging street life. Hill residents have long complained about the dearth of shopping and entertainment opportunities along the business corridors of Centre and Wylie avenues, but retailers have not followed public investment.

“The Hill District has more new affordable housing than other city neighborhoods. But Oak Hill, Skyline Terrace, Crawford Square and Bedford Hill—they all are islands. There’s not a lot of offsite redevelopment that connects them,” Mr. Stephany said.

WHAT MAKES FOR BETTER COMMUNITY IN THE HILL?



AFFORDABILITY

New housing in the Hill District includes townhomes on Dinwiddie Street constructed by TREK Development Group. This project, which included work on other nearby streets, consisted of a mix of new construction and rehabilitation of historic brownstones.



GREEN SPACE

Redevelopment in the Hill District emphasizes the creation of an attractive, welcoming environment that includes well-maintained lawns, trees and pleasant sidewalks, such as those found on the grounds of the Crawford Square development.



SCHOOLS

Community development plans in the Hill District call for investments in schools like Pittsburgh Miller PreK-5, where teachers and staff gave students an enthusiastic welcome on the first day of classes.



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Converting an aging trade school in the Hill into the Energy Innovation Center, a LEED — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — Platinum building, involved installing color-coded, visible HVAC and plumbing pipe as a teaching tool for students and a showcase to visitors of the building's systems.



PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Efforts to enhance the Hill District's quality of life include transit improvements such as providing more frequent bus service in the community.

“The coveted asset is Centre Avenue. The Hill Community Development Corporation has a great vision for Centre Avenue that could be the zipper that connects past investments together. They’re calling for a mix of uses with housing, entertainment, retail and cultural amenities. This next phase of redevelopment could build the fabric of the historic neighborhood, keep longtime Hill residents in place, and generate a great Main Street.”

Plans for Centre Avenue emphasize a walkable business district, with the city Urban Redevelopment Authority subsidizing commercial build-outs and providing loans to businesses in those storefronts. Residential and commercial building owners will be eligible for repairs of façades, roofs, sidewalks and steps, along with other improvements. The work complements acquisition of vacant and blighted homes that will be rehabbed and resold for between \$75,000 and \$110,000, promoting home ownership.

Other infrastructure improvements will rebuild the derelict Chauncey Street Steps, one of Pittsburgh’s unique public staircases, with LED lighting and stormwater diversion. Transit improvements under the city’s plans will include rerouting buses through the Hill District to provide more frequent service.

Bedford Avenue, the broad thoroughfare through the residential part of the community, also is slated for a makeover. With pedestrian-scaled lighting, existing historic markers and public art, it will be the renewed community’s signature boulevard.

In the proposal to federal HUD officials, high-quality public education is highlighted as an essential long-term goal, along with access to well-paying jobs, affordable housing, commercial development and improved infrastructure. The plan calls for an active Communities in Schools program in the neighborhood, with full-time staff to connect students to social services.

At the Downtown terminus of Bedford Avenue, the former Connelly Trade School is now the Energy Innovation Center. Bob Meeder, president and CEO of Pittsburgh Gateways Corporation, which developed EIC, said that the center is working with UPMC to add three more neighborhood training programs in environmental tech services: pharmacy tech, surgical tech, and mold and infection control. Other courses, in 3D printing and rapid prototyping, are also planned.

Ms. Felton believes the time has come for the Hill District to look forward to future growth and opportunities.

“What’s gone is gone. It’s not coming back,” she said. “Let’s be real, and offer what our young people want.” **h**