

SAVING THE UNIVERSITY CITY TOWNHOMES COMMUNITY: A CHALLENGE TO PENN, DREXEL, AND THE SCIENCE CENTER

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The proposed eviction of the tenants from the University City Townhomes in preparation for a sale of the property has all the elements of urban drama: gentrification, high tech development vs. established neighborhood value, soaring real estate appraisals, multiple lawsuits, a zoning fight, and a now dismantled encampment.

At the heart of this complexity is the question: *who gets to enjoy the benefits of living in a well-connected neighborhood with opportunities for advancement?* Let's face it: where we live shapes every aspect of our lives. It is what positions us for long-term health and well-being. We all deserve access to a home we can afford.

The shiny new buildings and growing success of the University City Science Center cover a darker story--the destruction through "urban renewal" of a lively African American neighborhood known as the Black Bottom, which stretched along Market Street between 34th and 40th Streets. Its clearance in the late sixties displaced more than 1,400 residents. A protest in 1969 from Philadelphia college students and activists compelled the Science Center to return the site to the city for low-income housing. This became the University City Townhomes,¹ a site-specific, Section 8 project whose developer agreed to build and operate the buildings for forty years in return for federally subsidized market-rate rent. Having fulfilled this commitment, the owner now wishes to vacate and sell the property, which is clearly its right. But there is more at stake.

¹ John L. Puckett, "Once the Black Bottom," *Context*, spring 2022, p 27 (https://issuu.com/aia_philadelphia/docs/spring_2022_context_issue-lo_rez)

Unless something changes, the residents, who are happy with their homes, will be dispersed throughout the region, forced to search for scarce Section 8 units elsewhere. In addition to their community, they will lose ready access to local schools, health care, cultural activities, employment opportunities, and other services being created by its institutional neighbors. **After a year of making statements on how Black Lives Matter, we cannot let another African American community experience “root shock”²-- the grief that comes with losing your neighborhood and community networks.**

City Council has attempted to address the problem by rezoning the site to require 20% affordable housing. The current property owners object to this limitation on the value of the site, and a legal battle has commenced. But beyond this, while inclusionary development policies, like this re-zoning, are necessary in a city that increasingly lacks high-quality, affordable home options, Council's plan does nothing to protect the current residents of University City Townhomes.

The problem is not unique to this site. These issues will continue to come to a head across Philadelphia as similar contracts expire at many other Section 8 projects in coming years. Given its high-visibility and valuable location, what happens at University City Townhomes has the potential to set a powerful precedent—for better or worse. As the clock ticks towards the eviction of the current residents, the continuing silence of their neighboring institutions grows more and more deafening.

It is time for Penn, Drexel, and the Science Center, who have developed the surrounding area over many years and reaped the enormous benefits of urban renewal, to publicly and loudly renew their

² “root shock”: a traumatic stress reaction related to the destruction of one’s emotional ecosystem. The ripple effects of root shock have an impact on entire communities that can last for decades. Mindy Fullilove

commitment to creating and maintaining diverse housing opportunities in the neighborhoods affected by their growth. They must provide, and advocate for others to provide, housing that is consistent with this vision. And regardless of the details of such plans, the current residents must be allowed to remain in their homes.

While the specifics of this commitment remain to be established, it must be built upon a public conversation that includes the voices and needs of the University City Townhome residents and the participation of the institutions that have contributed to and benefited from the devastation of this community. Moments like these, when consequences are clear and the city's eyes are focused on this community in peril, can be catalytic. Let's choose this moment to depart from the inequities of our old housing system and build something better.