

The Invisible Brother with a Brick

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"Aerial View of the Proposed Newark Site Outline, 1967." Records of the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry, RG/B-5, box 21, folder 3. Special Collections, George F. Smith Library of the Health Sciences, Rutgers University Libraries.

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Two white Newark, New Jersey police officers arrested John Smith, an African-American cabdriver, on the night of July 12, 1967. Police claimed Smith had tailgated a patrol car and resisted arrest; witnesses argued that officers had beaten Smith without reason. What is certain is that around 10:00 p.m. Smith stood inside the city's Fourth Precinct, 250 residents stood outside, rumors swirled that Smith had died (he had not), several Molotov cocktails hit the building and surrounding cars, and five days later Governor Richard Hughes ordered the withdrawal of the National Guard troops that had occupied the predominantly African-

From Newark to Ferguson, violence begets violence —but it can also create room for conversations about a more just world.

American Central Ward during Newark's worst riots.¹

The accounts that followed described extensive destruction along Springfield Avenue and a tragic human toll: 24 black Newarkers, one white police officer, and one white firefighter.² But a more complex story lurked beneath, for this uprising had deep roots in the violence that officials themselves had enacted. Newark's African-Americans regularly faced two kinds of violence: police violence and planning violence. John Smith's everyman name embodied a history of everyday police harassment of black men, from rough interrogation to killings by the predominantly white force. Agents of planning violence donned more bureaucratic clothing but arguably imposed a greater toll. Between the early 1950s and 1967, Newark, the leading recipient of federal redevelopment funding per capita, executed 17 urban renewal projects. In the Central Ward, the city's redevelopment body, the Newark Housing Authority (NHA), built campuses for the Newark College of Engineering and Rutgers University-Newark. Nearby, officials packed 18,000 black citizens into public housing high-rises. Such redevelopment wrought tremendous social costs, displacing as many as 25,000 and destroying almost 7,500 dwellings, only worsening already acute overcrowding and concentrated poverty. Indeed, if John Smith's arrest had sparked the riot, many blamed the latest redevelopment effort as its catalyst: a new, 150-acre campus for the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry in the Central Ward. That project, announced in December 1966, was to displace 8,000 more families and over 20,000 people. Understandably, residents responded to the news with anger.³

Planning violence and police violence sparked a violent reprisal, one of the most destructive among the many that marked this era of "long hot summers." But in the Central Ward, this response had an outcome that few could have foreseen. Planning and policing fomented the riots, but the riots unexpectedly fomented a new form of planning. Activists, frustrated by the medical school plans and what they would mean for a much-maligned neighborhood, found that the riots provided a remarkable tool that enabled resistance against Newark's redevelopment machine. With the July uprising hovering in the background, residents led by a young organizer, Junius Williams, found room to craft their own vision for their neighborhood, one that accommodated the medical school and also addressed the real needs of the Central Ward community. As Williams—an African-American Yale law student and civil rights veteran who first came to Newark in 1965—would later explain, an "invisible brother with a brick" stood in every room in which residents confronted officials in the aftermath of the riots.⁴ Black Newarkers used bricks as the stuff of both frustrated backlash and carefully negotiated physical and social change. Their story demonstrates that destructive planning could beget violence, but that violence could also beget more sensitive planning. In other words, something very tangibly beneficial grew out of this fraught chapter in Newark's history.

Newark's aggressive redevelopment program largely unfolded at

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the behest of the NHA's executive director, the Robert Moses-like Louis Danzig. When the state awarded Newark the medical school, the autocratic Danzig waved away displacement as a matter of little concern, calling relocation "a difficulty Newark has faced before and can face again." But Danzig's confidence revealed his obliviousness to a changed context. As one of the poorest and most segregated American cities, Newark provided fertile ground for organizers in the New Left, including the Students for a Democratic Society and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In the summer of 1967, Williams managed an anti-poverty program there, a front-row seat to the escalating tensions surrounding the medical school. At a May blight hearing concerning the project, for example, an itinerant organizer named Albert Roy Osborne, alias Colonel Hassan, wreaked havoc. His supporters pelted planners with eggs. When Newark's fire director declared "that the area be demolished whether a medical school is built or not," Hassan attacked the stenographer, overturning the machine and tearing the hearing's transcript. Thirty-one police officers led him out. Later, an associate flung a presentation board at a tape recorder. As police ejected him and officials adjourned the meeting, attendees chanted, "Hell no, we won't go."⁵

The 150-acre project heightened existing tensions in a beleaguered community. At the May hearings, Colonel Hassan promised, "we're going all the way to stop that school—if you had any intelligence, you'd build the school elsewhere and housing there." Five days in July legitimized his claim. Yet his bombast obscured a more nuanced statement that foreshadowed the nature of resistance after the summer. The goal became not simply to oppose the medical school or redevelopment, but to fight for renewal on the community's own terms, a goal embodied in the demand for community control of the ascendant Black Power Movement.⁶

Williams developed a response to the medical school in this light, focused on reducing the project's size, minimizing displacement, and organizing residents. In September, he rented an unheated storefront within the project site to serve as the headquarters of a new group, the Newark Area Planning Association (NAPA). Unlike earlier protest efforts, which were reactive and disparate, NAPA created a platform from which Williams could coordinate opposition. At Yale, Williams engaged activist architecture and planning faculty member Pat Goeters to lead a studio on the project. Goeters's students prepared an administrative complaint and crafted an alternate development plan based on community goals and the medical school's needs. They studied existing urban medical schools, finding that even this one's first phase—1.1 million square feet over 46 acres—dramatically exceeded precedents. Using Public Health Service standards as a guide, the studio accommodated the school's program in a campus of just 17 acres. In Newark, NAPA's staff canvassed door to door, opened a Freedom School in the storefront for neighborhood children, and reached still more residents in local bars, all to spread awareness of their cause and gather support.⁷

NAPA's leaders soon introduced a direct action strategy that drew from the memory of the recent riots. In September, Williams had written to supporters, "Newark is known now as one of the infamous riot cities. We should capitalize on that ... no one wants a return of violence." At a City Council hearing in early December, Phil Hutchings, Williams's associate, announced "The Negroes are not going to get anything out of this. ... The whole issue is still very emotional. Out there on South Orange Avenue, people are talking about Project Burn." Michael Davidson, NAPA's attorney, soon stood up to announce that activists had sent a telegram to Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Robert Weaver protesting the city's application for federal funding. Such an approach was carefully calculated. Hutchings, who had played a key role in introducing Black Power discourse to Newark, tapped into perceptions of that discourse, casting Davidson as the straight man and himself as the militant radical.⁸

Activists again employed their dualistic strategy when they met with a HUD official in their storefront the following week. Williams pointed to a disparity in units demolished and constructed and argued that officials moved tenants to substandard housing. Larry Miller, head of Newark's SNCC chapter, followed with a threat. "The rebellion in July was nothing compared to what will happen if the medical school is built," Miller promised. This was a dress rehearsal for NAPA's mid-December press conference, at which Jack Greenberg, the famed leader of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, announced that an administrative complaint was on its way to HUD. Pat Goeters then presented the 17-acre alternate plan. He was interrupted by a young African-American man in the audience who exclaimed, "Look here, white bread, I don't know about all this Ivy League school environment shit. ... If they try to take down all those houses, there's gonna be more blood." He stormed out, followed by several others. Goeters asked Williams, "Wasn't that your roommate, Phil?" Phil Hutchings put the proceedings in sharp relief. If his performance reminded some of Hassan's, that was precisely the point. In front of an audience of journalists, including the New York Times, NAPA's leaders offered two alternatives: a reprise of July 1967 or development on the community's terms. The latter position seemed moderate against Hutchings's outburst.⁹

Indeed, activists' repeated invocation of the "invisible brother with a brick" opened up space for the carefully researched demands they made in the language of law and planning. Officials took notice. Several days after the press conference, medical school leaders reduced their plan to 98.2 acres. In mid-January, federal officials sent a letter to New Jersey's governor, Richard J. Hughes, outlining seven conditions that backers would have to meet before HUD would approve the project, including minimized residential displacement and direct negotiations among the medical school, the city, and residents.¹⁰

NAPA seized on the negotiations as a chance to finally confront redevelopment officials. The intricacies of these six sessions in

February 1968 are unimportant to this telling. Crucial here is that at a table in a state office building a few blocks from the neighborhood that officials had redeveloped and redeveloped sat Williams, his allies, and Louis Danzig. Finding themselves at last on equal terms with the officials who had wreaked so much havoc in the Central Ward, activists forced a parcel-by-parcel discussion of Newark's land and the redevelopment reforms they intended to obtain.¹¹

In the past, officials had treated such demands with disdain. But the resonance of recent violence had helped activists reach the table, and now they pursued constructive ends through careful negotiation, using the medical school as leverage toward something bigger. Danzig, who had claimed nearly absolute power, now faced a very different reality, forced to agree to meaningful changes for his last large project to go forward. Indeed, the "Newark Agreements," as the parties called their final document, restricted the medical school to 57.9 acres; established community health programs; promised staged displacement, rent subsidies, and a relocation review board; created an affirmative action construction jobs program; designated a citizen committee with veto power over redevelopment; and formed a community housing council with development control over 60 acres transferred by the NHA. If not a total victory for the Central Ward, it was close. As Williams reflected, "We regard [it] as a trade—the land was given up by black people to get other services they need ... medical care, jobs, good housing."¹²

The Central Ward provided a complex spatial problem. Almost exclusively black and predominantly poor due to segregational governmental policies, it attracted further intervention precisely because of those characteristics. Yet it was also a unique space, one that black residents inherited at the hands of Danzig and others, but one that they could also claim as their own. The Central Ward created a power base that could respond forcefully using a variety of tools. Williams and his fellow activists grasped this potential, seizing on a strategy—at times legalistic, design oriented, and militant—that turned an oppositional protest into a productive one.

Their history shows that destructive and constructive spatial strategies were—and are—deeply entwined. In rising up, Central Ward residents signaled their frustration with state-led violence that exacerbated bleak social conditions. This reaction inspired effective strategy at the ground level. Activists tapped into recent memories of Springfield Avenue in flames to force officials to negotiate redevelopment on the community's terms. They gained newfound power, a victory that undermined the top-down model of urban redevelopment that cities had practiced for over two decades.

This experience is again pertinent today, amidst renewed attention to urban violence. Like the planning and police violence that shaped Newark, the planning and police violence that has shaped communities like Ferguson, Missouri, has complex consequences. Destructive counter-reactions have tremendous costs, but can

make people pay attention and listen to the residents of those communities. If Newark's story offers an object lesson, it is that violence begets violence, but, unexpectedly, can also create room for conversations about a more just world that are often otherwise elusive.

Cite this piece as Briand Goldstein, "The Invisible Brother with a Brick," *The Aggregate website* (Not Peer Reviewed), Volume 2, March, 2015. Accessed March 8, 2015, <http://we-aggregate.org/piece/the-invisible-brother-with-a-brick>.

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