

This quarter, I'm thinking of writing about something I've never willingly considered before in my life: urban redevelopment. That's when a city takes old, dusty, vacant abandoned land and transforms it into something new, usually to boost economic growth and draw more eyes, ears, and money to the area. Redevelopment is expensive, but if it's successful, it pays off in big ways for the city and the development company. That potential payout raises a few questions, though. When the city says they want to redevelop some land, is it just greed talking? Will the city prioritize profitability over the will of the people already living on or near that land? How will this land redevelopment benefit those folks? Will it even benefit them at all? Urban redevelopment is a thorny and complex topic, intersecting with a whole host of other issues including race, economic policy, history, and corporate greed. There's a lot of ground to cover, and I intend to investigate this topic as deeply as I can within the constraints of this course.

My current curiosity for the problems surrounding urban redevelopment stems from some reading I did last summer. To pass the time and maintain sanity during COVID-19 lockdowns, I would get on the Internet and read journal articles, news reports, blogs, and Wikipedia articles. I found myself reading up on the events of World War II which led to Japanese surrender in the final acts of the Pacific theater. I read that components of the warhead dropped on Hiroshima were assembled at Hunters Point Shipyard in San Francisco, California. I read that the Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood, where the shipyard is, has had a long history of poverty and crime. I read that the land the shipyard sits on is radioactive and pumped full of carcinogens. And finally, I read that the City of San Francisco has an ambitious redevelopment plan in the works that will turn the old shipyard into a major business and residential center. You can imagine my shock after reading all that. A piece of land sitting right across the Bay from me had been the furnishing grounds for a weapon that ended the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. The land is stained, soaked in toxins and drenched in blood. And now, a land developer is getting ready to build over it like nothing's wrong; to portion off this deadly land and tell citizens to make their homes on it. This cursed land has already left a devastating impact on the lives of so many. If nothing changes, it'll totally go on to devastate the lives of many more, so I thought. I wondered: is this how land redevelopment normally goes? Is the land going to be safe? There's no way, right? What will this do for the people of the neighborhood? Why in the world are real estate companies like this? I instantly felt the need to do more research on it all. And that's how I arrived at my topic!

That all happened during the summer of 2020. At the time of writing, it is winter quarter 2021. Still, my newfound interest in urban redevelopment won't go away. There are a few reasons for this. The first reason is pretty personal and kind of minor, so I'll get it out of the way up front. Once upon a time, I used to drive up to an empty lot on a distant ridge in the Oakland Hills to relax and unwind. Up there, it was

chill, quiet, and peaceful. Not a sound besides the gentle breeze. Not a feeling besides the sun on your face. Most importantly, there was an unparalleled view of the East Bay below. On clear afternoons, you could see all the way across the water to San Francisco without even squinting. It's the greatest view of the Bay Area I've ever seen. One morning, I drove up to see the view blocked by a new construction project. The lot was now fenced off, filled with planks and scaffolding. I was sort of pissed, but that mild anger gave way to curiosity. After all, my viewing spot was at the top of an old volcanic rock mining site called the Leona Quarry; I'd heard of plans to redevelop the surrounding land, and it appears my view just got swallowed up in one of those redevelopment schemes. If I couldn't admire my priceless view of the Bay anymore, I might as well find out why. Now, this writing project on urban redevelopment gives me a chance to spend some time looking into what's going on.

Onwards to the other reasons. There's a sense of awe I get when I investigate the stuff I've talked about. All of this stuff related to urban redevelopment at the Hunters Point Shipyard and its role in the war and the circumstances of the neighborhood, as well as the Leona Quarry and its history and future—it's all just so cool to me. It's cool to investigate these places. I'm not really sure why I feel this way. I just do. Maybe it's because these sites are visually and naturally magnificent, or it's because they're tied to huge and impactful historical events, or it's because it's thrilling to see how the threads of history and geography and economics intertwine and even more thrilling to think about where they'll lead. I don't know. But choosing to write about this stuff will give me an opportunity to continue to engage with subjects I think are inherently really cool, and I'm definitely up for that.

Here's the last reason I've chosen this as my topic: because I want to have a voice in the matter. I want to learn more about the history of urban redevelopment in my region and the way the redevelopment process operates so I'll have an informed opinion grounded in reality. I believe the best way (the only way, maybe) to make systemic change for the better is to write it into law. It's my opinion that there's a lot wrong with America's housing and urban development situation, and the best way to right those wrongs is to change laws. I can't just walk up to the Oakland City Hall and write a bunch of new statutes in the Oakland Municipal Code, but I can certainly educate others and encourage civic action, and that indirectly leads to the changing of laws anyway. I'll be better able to spread knowledge and convince people that certain issues are important when I've got a factually sound perspective based in historical truths.

In order to narrow down my topic, I'm going to target only the urban redevelopment that's happening in the San Francisco Bay Area right now. More specifically, I want to focus on urban redevelopment in the two places I mentioned previously: the [Hunters Point Shipyard](#), where the atomic bomb's components were built, and the [Leona Quarry](#), below my empty lot on the hillside. I'm picking these

two sites because I've been to both areas plenty of times and I feel a personal connection to them. Also because land redevelopment is actively ongoing at both locations, making present discussion of my topic valuable. Joe Horton, the instructor for this class, brought a great idea up during an in-class review of an excerpt of my proposal. He suggested that I frame Hunters Point Shipyard and the Leona Quarry in contrast with one another, and write about the development going on at both sites, highlighting the differences between them and using them as examples (or counterexamples) for my position. I really like how that idea sounds, because it'll allow me to investigate and write about both of my sites, which I am enthusiastic about doing. I will adopt that suggestion as my narrowed-down topic.

My initial position is one of antagonism towards urban redevelopment. This might sound kind of silly. After all, a city's gotta grow. How can you hate a city government for making an effort to revitalize the old land that lies within their jurisdiction? I think revitalization of old land for the purposes of improving a city's social and economic atmosphere is a great idea. My issue is with the way it's done. From what I remember from high school economics class, the city usually hands the reins over to a massive real estate land development company. I'm of the opinion that, because the company's primary motive is to turn a profit by any means necessary, this kind of deal ends up ignoring people's concerns, crushing people's trust, and souring the public's relationship with the company and the government. That's a terrible outcome.

I followed a similar process to the one outlined in the slide on Malcolm Gladwell's "Big and Bad" to conjure up some driving questions. Here's what that process looked like. I don't have all the answers yet; those will come soon.

Q: I drove down to Hunters Point Shipyard a while back. The entire place was fenced off and boarded up, and a security guard turned me away at the gate. Why?

A: There's a land redevelopment project going on down there.

Q: What does the city aim to accomplish with that project?

A: They're trying to clean the shipyard up, tear the buildings down, and create new housing on that land.

Q: Who's in charge of the operation?

A: The Lennar company, a real estate and home construction firm.

Q: What do the people of Hunters Point think of this company and their project?

A: Not good.

Q: How are the people of Bayview-Hunters Point doing?

A: Not good.

Q: You think maybe this land development company pounced at the opportunity to make a quick buck while ignoring the will of the citizens living in this poverty-stricken neighborhood?

A: Maybe.

Q: You think this might be a perfect example of how the urban redevelopment process sacrifices the public good for profit? And that something's gotta change?

A: Maybe.

Q: What's going on across the Bay at the Leona Quarry?

A: Urban redevelopment projects are happening on tracts of land both above and below the quarry.

Q: What kickstarted this effort to redevelop the land?

A: A lack of demand for stone caused the quarry to go out of business. Now, it's just a gigantic empty sloped rock. If the city can build a house on it, you bet they'll do it.

Q: What are they building?

A: Expensive townhomes below, huge single-family residences above.

Q: The top of the Leona Quarry was home to a beautiful view of the East Bay, and running down the quarry were aqueducts and excellent walking trails. Endangered plants and animals have populated the quarry ever since it shut down. There's a risk of landslides and mudslides for the land right below the quarry. Will these development plans see success, despite all the potential challenges?

A: Don't know.

Q: You think the land redevelopment companies here care about the challenges? Or are they going to do the same thing as Lennar and sweep them under the rug? Sacrifice the public good to make money?

A: Hard to say.

Urban redevelopment in the Bay Area is a hot topic that everyone's talking about everywhere, from city council meetings to social sciences journals to Internet blogs. Ordinarily, the city government and real estate development company are at odds with the city's citizens. The government hands a real estate company a contract to redevelop some land, they go do it, the company makes some money in the short term, and the city government makes money in the long term. The people of the area, however, may oppose new developments for a wide variety of reasons. This causes the government and real estate company to come into conflict with the citizens. I'd say the leading experts on these topics are the people directly tied to redevelopment: urban development researchers, lawmakers, contractors, even ordinary residents who have been around to see the development process through. I

mention a couple of these folks by name in the next paragraph.

Digging for evidence on this topic is something I'm really looking forward to. I intend to consult online newspaper archives, other databases of old print material, journal articles, and perhaps a couple documentaries to get information on my two redevelopment sites. There's an excellent geology blog written by a KQED Science Contributor and Oakland native named Andrew Alden with information about the Leona Quarry and the onsite redevelopment projects dating back to the early 2000's. I'll definitely consult that, and if Alden is available, maybe even contact him directly to get more background information. In addition, there are two documentaries by San Franciscan filmmaker Kevin Epps titled "Straight Outta Hunters Point" and "Straight Outta Hunters Point 2" that ran for a while in indie theaters across the Bay. These documentaries chronicle the history of the Hunters Point community, and I've got a good feeling that these films will contain a lot of valuable info on predatory real estate firms sinking their teeth into the neighborhood. If I'm able to get ahold of either of these films, I'll be happy. Lastly, my two peer reviewers gave me some pretty good feedback on where else to look for information. They told me to check Bay Area local news platforms and state/local government sites, and those sound valuable to me, so I'll put those on my list.

I arrived at my topic by consulting Wikipedia a ton. Don't worry, I'm not going to be citing Wikipedia in my finished writing. However, I did a lot of my summer lockdown reading on this topic by diving into Wikipedia articles, and it would be wrong for me to say that Wikipedia didn't help. I also read a piece by Jules Suzdaltsev for Vice titled "Hunters Point Is San Francisco's Radioactive Basement." In it, Suzdaltsev meets with Kevin Epps and takes a tour through Hunters Point, covering the background of the neighborhood as well as the effects of the redevelopment projects at the shipyard and elsewhere. Lastly, the Oakland Geology blog I mentioned in the previous paragraph was a great source I skimmed through before deciding on my topic. I'm going to return to it and read further now that I've (hopefully) finalized my topic decision.

While an understanding of this topic would be beneficial to city-dwelling folks anywhere in the world, this topic is of particular interest to my fellow Bay Area residents who seek to learn a little bit about the urban redevelopment projects going on around them. If you're wondering what the deal is with that giant empty mountain face next to Keller Avenue off I-580, or if you're curious about the history of Hunters Point Shipyard, or if you're wary of greedy land redevelopment companies and want to know what we should do about them—this writing is for you. I'm aiming my writing towards an audience of ordinary people. I'm hoping to come off honest, factual, and forthright, yet slightly informal so reading doesn't become a boring struggle. I want it to be something the general public can digest and remember, because I view this

project as something that will enrich the general public's understanding of urban redevelopment and all topics adjacent.