

Rebirth of Over-the-Rhine

Documentary film synopsis

“In all of America, there is no more promising an urban area for revitalization than . . . Over-the-Rhine.”

— Arthur Frommer, 1993

Cincinnati’s historic inner-city core—Over-the-Rhine—is at a critical point.

History. This once-bustling community of German beer brewers and pork packers built the nation’s largest collection of 19th-century Italianate architecture. It is an expansive architectural gem, but today it has lost about half of its historic buildings. Preservationists call it a race against time.

Poverty. Over-the-Rhine is a crucible of poverty, which has exacted a human toll: crime, drugs, and homelessness persist. Its mean streets were featured in the Oscar-winning film, *Traffic*: Michael Douglas played the US drug czar whose daughter was drawn to the dismal heroin dens of Over-the-Rhine. In 2001, race riots garnered national attention. The neighborhood continued its decline.

Transformation. But today, change is in the air. In the past five years alone, an unprecedented \$100 million of private and public investment has flowed into Over-the-Rhine. Arts organizations, restaurants, and retail shops are breathing new life into the barren shells of 19th-century wonders. Previously hesitant private and public developers are now wagering fortunes and reputations on the revitalization. But as one developer says, “There is no guarantee it will work.”

The Heart. The epicenter is Washington Park. This regal green space is framed by the city’s most historic arts buildings. A century ago, it was considered a showcase park of the Midwest. Today, however, the park showcases not the city’s grandeur, but rather the desolation of the downtrodden. Washington Park is a magnet for local and out-of-town homeless and drug addicts. For these individuals, the park is a refuge—for now.

The Battle. Here at Washington Park, contrasting visions of revitalization conflict. The ambitious new School for Creative & Performing Arts is going up next to a homeless shelter with a proud history of social advocacy. As one homeless man said, “Now that they’re building this school here, they gonna try to put us outta the park.” Will the park be off-limits to the homeless? If so, where will they go? Washington Park is the defining faultline of Over-the-Rhine’s renewal. Issues of race and class infuse debates from city council to churches to barbershops. Equally good-willed people advocate opposed positions.

Rebirth of Over-the-Rhine. As winter turns to spring, Washington Park’s renovation begins. The first step is exhuming bodies from below the parkland, remnants of a forgotten German cemetery. Meanwhile, years of pent-up dreams, convictions, and frustrations are surfacing as well. Amidst revitalization, some people grapple with loss, others are inspired by hope, and one man seeks redemption.

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CHARACTERS

Shot from 2009-2011 in and around Washington Park, *Rebirth of Over-the-Rhine* chronicles the lives of residents, developers, social service providers, a spiritual leader, business owners, and a city council member.

Not long ago, 51-year-old **Mike Jones** called a bench at Washington Park home. Today, thanks to a program called Shelter Plus, he has an apartment. More than anything he wants to be self-sufficient, but landing a job is impossible, especially with his prison record. Once a culinary training program called **Cincinnati Cooks** accepts him, Jones seems headed in a new direction. But the pull of old friends and addictions at Washington Park is strong, and Jones confronts his demons one last time.

Bobby Maly and **Jim Moll** (The Model Group) and **Bill Baum** (Urban Sites) are developers who have proven they can build condos that preserve the neighborhood's distinctive 19th-century architecture. It's a painstaking process, but important. Working in close concert with the powerful **3CDC** (Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation), they are slowly drawing new residents into the neighborhood. But why are some opposed to their work?

Resident and architect **Martha Dorff** has transformed a bullet-ridden alley on the north end of the park into a tidy, middle-class block—that is, if anyone will buy the new homes. For-sale signs predominate: buyers are slow to invest near the park. Dorff presses on, doubling down on her investment, buoyed by her strong faith.

Pastor **Fred Cook** leads the **First Lutheran Church** ministry, a half-block from the thriving 1132 Bar, the sole remaining watering hole near Washington Park. Attending to the spiritual and basic needs of the park's homeless, Cook recognizes their dreams, demons, and generosity of spirit. Some of his flock include **Tommy Banks** ("Mayor of Washington Park") and his sidekick **River Rat**. For 25 years, Tommy and River have sat on the steps of First Lutheran, witnessing Washington Park's every change. They eyeball the new school and park renovation with humor and dread.

Thirteen-year-old **Tyren Hutchings** lives in Over-the-Rhine. The pull of the street is constant, but his grandmother is raising him with an iron grip. Tyren's hope is to be accepted into the new School for Creative and Performing Arts and major in dance. His only focus is preparing for the audition that will determine his fate.

Political patriarch **William Mallory, Sr.** stops by the barbershop near City Hall to get his hair cut by **Tony Hampton, Mike Jones'** confidant. For Mallory, "history repeats itself." He offers wise counsel to resolve the Washington Park dilemma.

Within eyeshot of Washington Park is **City Hall**, where policies that impact Over-the-Rhine are debated. Former Mayor, **Councilwoman Roxanne Qualls'** approach is popular—she received the most votes in the 2009 general election. But forging a broad compromise that pleases developers, homeless advocates, preservationists, and city council members remains a demanding, elusive task.

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