The Trap of Triage: Lessons from the “Team Four Plan”

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Abstract
In 1975, consultants from Team Four Inc. advised St. Louis planners to pursue a strategy of neighborhood triage: “conservation” for areas in good health, “redevelopment” for areas just starting to decline, and “depletion” for areas already in severe distress. The firm’s recommended strategy reflected the latest thinking among urban planners, but it provoked outrage among residents of the city’s predominantly black North Side, who read “depletion” as a promise of benign neglect. In this article, I explain how Team Four justified its advice, and why, four decades later, the controversy over its memo persists.

Keywords
urban triage, urban renewal, community development, CDBG, St. Louis, shrinking cities, race, inequality, uneven development

Introduction
On May 19, 1975, the planning consultants at Team Four Inc. awoke to the following headline in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch: “Plan Said to Hurt Black Area in City.”1 The “plan” in question was one of the firm’s memos, “Citywide Implementation Strategies: The Draft Comprehensive Plan,” which Team Four had submitted to the city’s Community Development Commission two months earlier for its review. The memo advised St. Louis planners to implement the city’s forthcoming master plan through a strategy of neighborhood triage: “conservation” for areas in good health, “redevelopment” for areas just starting to decline, and gradual “depletion” for areas already in severe distress.2 The firm’s recommended strategy reflected the latest thinking among urban planners, but it provoked outrage among residents of the city’s predominantly black North Side, who read “depletion” as a promise of benign neglect.

In this article, I explain how Team Four justified its advice, and why, four decades later, the controversy over its memo persists, even though neither the memo nor the master plan it addressed was ever adopted as official policy. This discussion highlights an important moment in the history of urban planning when neighborhood rehabilitation—always a stated priority for planners but rarely well funded—eclipsed clearance and redevelopment as the predominant strategy for addressing

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urban decline. This transition represented a victory for distressed urban communities that had long fought the upheaval of urban renewal, but it proved hollow for many. While these communities no longer faced the same threat of forcible displacement, many found that they were still unable to access resources for improving their neighborhoods. Studies found that the tools of neighborhood rehabilitation, like code enforcement and minor home repair, were ineffective remedies for areas that were already substantially abandoned. So planners favored targeting such resources to areas just starting to decline, where public funds would leverage greater private investment. Yet, in segregated cities like St. Louis, enacting such a policy would not only leave the most distressed communities without a pathway to renewal, it would also implicitly favor white residents over minorities, because racial minorities were concentrated in the most abandoned neighborhoods while neighborhoods in transition were more often white. The debate over the so-called Team Four Plan brought the hollowness of this bargain and its racial repercussions to light.

From Urban Renewal to Community Development

In 1973, the city of St. Louis began a two-year effort to rewrite its citywide master plan. At a time of rising alarm at the city’s physical and fiscal decline, planners saw the effort as an opportunity to rethink the city’s long-standing strategic response to blight, which had come under increasing criticism for placing too much emphasis on clearance and redevelopment and not enough on saving neighborhoods through rehabilitation, despite the city’s verbal commitment to the opposite priorities.

Since the earliest days of municipal planning in St. Louis, officials predicted an urban crisis would inevitably grip the city. In 1917, Harland Bartholomew, the city’s first and longest serving “Engineer” of urban planning explained that the city’s inability to annex land—owing to its legal separation from St. Louis County in 1876—would lead to the gradual loss of its tax base as factories and wealthy residents relocated to new facilities and housing in the suburbs. Bartholomew’s argument rested on an early iteration of the concept of neighborhood filtering. According to this theory, which social scientists would articulate more fully in the 1930s, private developers built most new housing at the metropolitan fringe for the middle and upper classes. Initially, the fringe of the region fell within the central city’s boundaries, but as time went on and the city’s land was built out, most new development would occur in the suburbs. As new housing was constructed, higher-income families moved outward to fill it, leaving behind aging housing stock in the central city that was passed down first to white, middle-income families, and then, as the neighborhood declined and maintenance costs mounted, to landlords who subdivided the properties and rented the units to lower-income families and people of color. At this stage, further decline became inevitable. Bankers interpreted the presence of racial minorities and the poor as a sign that a neighborhood had reached the final stage in its life cycle. They then denied loans to property owners on this basis, preventing them from improving their homes and making the prophecy of neighborhood decline self-fulfilling. Unable to increase profits through renovation, landlords ceased to maintain their properties, renting the units at falling prices until they were no longer habitable and then abandoning them.

By 1936, in the city’s Urban Land Policy, Bartholomew warned that this cycle was already taking its toll: “To state the condition in its simplest terms—if adequate measures are not taken, the city is faced with gradual economic and social collapse. The old central areas of the city are being abandoned and this insidious trend will continue until the entire city is engulfed.” As seen in Figure 1, by 1947, in the Comprehensive Plan, Bartholomew designated more than a third of the city “blighted” or “obsolete.” These areas formed the historic core of the city, where most residences were constructed prior to the institution of building codes, and they encompassed the entirety of the black ghetto.
Figure 1. Obsolete and blighted districts, city of St. Louis, 1947. Source: St. Louis City Plan Commission, Comprehensive City Plan: St. Louis, Missouri (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis City Plan Commission, 1947), Plate 13. Courtesy of the St. Louis Urban Redevelopment Agency.
In response, Bartholomew called for a three-pronged housing program. Obsolete neighborhoods would require total clearance and redevelopment. In those areas, “It is necessary to create a new environment,” he wrote. “This can be accomplished only by large scale operations.” Blighted neighborhoods, by contrast, could still be rehabilitated through targeted interventions that preserved most existing housing: “Obsolete buildings should be removed, some streets should be closed, new park, playground and recreation areas created, small concentrated shop areas established, and individual buildings should be repaired and brought up to a good minimum standard.” The city’s remaining neighborhoods required protection from encroachment by blight. This could be achieved through stricter zoning and the formation of strong neighborhood associations.

Of these three housing objectives, Bartholomew considered neighborhood rehabilitation the most important. “The rehabilitation of blighted areas is the No Man’s Land of housing,” he wrote. “It is more important than reconstruction of obsolete areas . . . Without a definite plan for the rehabilitation of the present blighted areas new obsolete areas will develop faster than present areas can be reconstructed.” But when significant federal funds for urban renewal first became available after passage of the Housing Act of 1949 and the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, both white and black political leaders initially agreed on the need to prioritize major clearance and redevelopment projects. The construction of the Pruitt–Igoe public housing complex and the redevelopment of Mill Creek Valley were emblematic of the era. The Pruitt–Igoe project completely cleared fifty-seven acres on the near North Side, replacing a dilapidated neighborhood with thirty-three high-rise apartment buildings designed by architect Minoru Yamasaki. The Mill Creek Valley project was even larger in scale. In 1959, crews began clearing the 454-acre neighborhood that ran along the southern edge of the central corridor. At the time, the neighborhood was still the working-class heart of black St. Louis, home to nearly 20,000 residents and hundreds of businesses. Yet, the project received the public backing of civil rights leaders like Ernest Calloway, president of the St. Louis chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who saw an opportunity to improve the dire living conditions of African Americans and to employ out-of-work residents in the reconstruction of their own neighborhoods. These projects and others—including three highway construction projects in the 1960s—ultimately cleared hundreds of acres in all, primarily in majority black neighborhoods.

At the same time, St. Louis began piloting an initiative to stop the spread of blight in the first place. In 1953, the city launched the St. Louis Neighborhood Rehabilitation Program. This locally funded program applied concentrated code enforcement to neighborhoods in the early stages of decline, starting with the Cherokee Street area and Hyde Park. The neighborhoods chosen for the program were typically white, middle income, and home to active residents; black neighborhoods were also chosen for concentrated enforcement, but only if the racial composition of the neighborhoods was deemed stable, not in transition. To complement code enforcement, the city also invested in neighborhood improvements. Between 1955 and 1958, the city spent US$434,000 on parks, playgrounds, and other facilities in targeted areas, and residents invested US$1.3 million in home repair in response to 12,000 code violations. The program proved popular, and, after a 1954 revision to the Housing Act made federal funding available for “conservation” programs—programs, like the one in St. Louis, that sought to rehabilitate neighborhoods through code enforcement, home repair, and small capital improvements—cities across the country started similar initiatives.

By the early 1960s, the consensus in favor of clearance and redevelopment began to falter, even as demand for neighborhood rehabilitation grew citywide. Residents had come to refer to the Mill Creek Valley project as “Hiroshima Flats” because the cleared land had sat idle so long. Black support turned to opposition when the city failed to uphold its promises to hire black construction workers and compensate displaced residents. Opponents of urban renewal also called out the
growing emphasis on commercial and industrial redevelopment rather than replacement housing.\textsuperscript{24} Amidst this growing frustration, St. Louis voters twice rejected a 1962 bond issue for urban renewal.\textsuperscript{25} Yet, in the same year, voters approved a US$2 million bond issue to expand the St. Louis Neighborhood Rehabilitation Program. The bond financed new sidewalks, streetlights, parks, and playgrounds in targeted areas, as well as resurfaced streets and alleys. The city also expanded the scope of its code enforcement program.\textsuperscript{26}

In 1965, A. J. Cervantes rode the growing backlash against urban renewal to the mayor’s office, winning crucial support from black voters, in part by promising to expand access to neighborhood rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{27} When funding from the new Federally Assisted Code Enforcement (FACE) program became available that fall, residents held him to his promise. In October 1965, community organizers from the West End, a formerly affluent white neighborhood whose black population had jumped from 1,150 in 1950 to 57,300 in 1960, presented the new mayor with 3,000 signatures threatening a tax strike unless he included the neighborhood in its expanded rehabilitation program.\textsuperscript{28} Ignoring the advice of federal administrators who wrote that FACE assistance was “not authorized for use in the most depressed slum and blighted areas,” the mayor agreed.\textsuperscript{29}

However, subsequent evaluations of the St. Louis FACE program found this new need-based targeting strategy to be ineffective.\textsuperscript{30} Residents in poor neighborhoods proved difficult to organize partly because they lacked the resources to repair their homes in response to citations. In fact, St. Louis planners found that targeted code enforcement actually hastened decline by encouraging landlords to walk away from their properties rather than make costly repairs. Planners in other cities, including Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia, reached similar conclusions. The only code enforcement success stories were recorded in more affluent areas, like Chicago’s Hyde Park—Kenwood district, rather than in areas of high distress.\textsuperscript{31}

By the early 1970s, disappointed by the results of the FACE program, Mayor Cervantes backtracked on his earlier targeting strategy, returning the focus to middle-class areas rather than the most distressed.\textsuperscript{32} The city was also rethinking its remaining commitment to clearance and redevelopment. After two decades of costly and unpopular urban renewal projects, the city had little progress to show for it. In 1950, the city’s population stood at 856,796. By 1970, it had fallen by 27 percent to 622,236, even as the metropolitan population grew 12.4 percent to 2,410,884.\textsuperscript{33} In 1972, St. Louis began demolishing Pruitt–Igoe, its now notorious public housing project built just fifteen years earlier.\textsuperscript{34} The city’s finances were in shambles. A RAND report, issued in August of 1973, cemented the dismal mood. The report foresaw three possible futures for the city of St. Louis: “continued decline; stabilization in a new role as an increasingly black suburb; and return to a former role as the center of economic activity in the metropolitan area.”\textsuperscript{35} Of these, the first, continued decline, was deemed the most likely, while the second, a new role as “a large suburb among many other suburbs,” was considered the best case scenario. Even this limited positive outcome would not be possible without new and significant commitments of external revenue from the federal government, the state of Missouri, and the region—all unlikely prospects.\textsuperscript{36}

The 1973 \textit{St. Louis Development Program}—a fifteen-year, US$1.4 billion redevelopment plan produced under Mayor Cervantes—reflected this realism.\textsuperscript{37} Like the 1947 \textit{Comprehensive Plan}, the \textit{Development Program} was premised on a strategy of “first preserving those neighborhood districts which are still essentially sound, maintaining and improving districts which are threatened by encroaching blight, and systematically rebuilding and rehabilitating those districts which are extensively deteriorated.”\textsuperscript{38} But this plan accepted the city’s limited resources, noting that many neighborhoods requiring reconstruction could not be feasibly redeveloped within the plan’s fifteen-year time span. With the exception of designated urban renewal and model cities areas—urban renewal projects that were already underway in 1972—the plan labeled all areas still requiring clearance and redevelopment as “Interim Action Areas” (see Figures 2 and 3).\textsuperscript{39} These areas were to receive increased community and social services and a program of land banking to gradually prepare for
Figure 2. Diagram of citywide strategy, city of St. Louis, 1973. Source: St. Louis City Plan Commission, St. Louis Development Program (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis City Plan Commission, June 1973), S6.
Figure 3. Interim action areas, city of St. Louis, 1973. All nine ‘Interim Action Areas’ were north side neighborhoods with majority black populations. Source: St. Louis City Plan Commission, *St. Louis Development Program* (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis City Plan Commission, June 1973), 54.
future redevelopment, but they would not be redeveloped in the foreseeable future, despite their need. Instead, the city would focus its energies on rehabilitating neighborhoods on the verge of decline, returning to Harland Bartholomew’s original 1947 plea to put neighborhood restoration first.

**The “Team Four Plan”**

It was at this moment of transition in city policy that St. Louis began drafting its new master plan. Looking to further shake up the status quo, the City Plan Commission hired a local planning firm, Team Four Inc., as consultants to the project. Encouraged to work independently from city planners, the firm was offered a US$38,000 commission to draft twelve technical memos to inform the planning process from behind the scenes.

For Team Four Inc., the commission represented a major coup. In 1973, the firm was just five years old. Its principals—Richard Ward, Jerome Pratter, William Albinson, and Brian Kent—had met in graduate school at Washington University in St. Louis, where they studied urban law and design together. All newcomers to St. Louis, they were drawn to the region by the strength of Washington University’s faculty, which at the time included Charles Leven, Daniel Mandelker, Roger Montgomery, and Oscar Newman. These professors would go on to publish a series of seminal research papers on St. Louis and urban decline. Inspired by what they were learning, Ward, Pratter, Albinson, and Kent decided to put down roots. After graduating in 1968, the twenty-something upstarts went into business together. As they explained to a reporter in 1969, “This is where the action is. We feel St. Louis has turned the corner.”

Team Four submitted its first batch of memos to the Community Development Commission in March 1974. One of these memos, “City Wide Implementation Strategies for the Draft Comprehensive Plan,” would later gain infamy as the so-called “Team Four Plan.” This memo, which was resubmitted in final form on March 31, 1975, advised St. Louis planners to apply different treatments to neighborhoods based on their condition and market potential: “conservation” for areas in good health, “redevelopment” for areas just starting to decline, and gradual “depletion” for areas already in severe distress. The designations would be based on the age and physical condition of the building stock, the availability of private financing, levels of public service, and population stability. Of the three treatments, the memo named conservation of strong neighborhoods the highest priority, targeted redevelopment of in-between neighborhoods the second highest priority, and gradual depletion and redevelopment of deteriorated areas the third priority.

Conservation areas were defined as areas that continued to attract private investment. These were healthy areas of the city that already enjoyed abundant public services as well as private business activity. According to the memo, the success of these areas depended on “continued high level public services.” Any restriction of services could shake the confidence of private actors, leading the city to lose its most successful neighborhoods. “If these areas are lost,” the memo warns, “no plan or program can hope to save the City or renew what is left.” The maintenance of high-quality services and infrastructure in these areas would, therefore, need to be a “top priority” for the city. Conservation areas were to provide the foundation for the rest of the city’s renewal.

To ensure the stability of these areas, the memo called for infill development that matched the character of existing housing; increases in school funding; greater police protection; strict code enforcement through an occupancy permit-based enforcement program; restrictions on transit-oriented development; and buffering between neighborhoods and new transit lines. The memo also encouraged private initiatives to supplement or replace public services. The memo recommended user fees for trash service and code enforcement, the establishment of additional neighborhood associations to fund special services and improvements, the creation of business associations to finance and manage industrial parks and shopping centers, and the creation of a private–public authority to...
manage the central business district and pay for improvements through a special assessment on central business district properties. The memo did not geographically identify specific redevelopment areas, but it suggested that any area suitable for Missouri’s Chapter 353 Tax Abatement program would meet the criteria of a redevelopment area. Passed in 1945 and still in effect today, the Chapter 353 program grants developers long-term tax abatements and the power of eminent domain over “blighted” properties. The program was and is used to redevelop individual parcels in areas of potential growth. In 1975, most properties declared “blighted” under the program were zoned commercial or industrial, and they were primarily located in the central corridor—either in the central business district (the entirety of which was declared “blighted” under the program) or Central West End. As of 1975, only a handful of parcels had been targeted for redevelopment on the North Side.

The memo recommended pursuing redevelopment strategically. Redevelopment projects would only be approved if they could be paired with capital improvements and an increase in public services, including the onset of strict code enforcement. Along with use of the Chapter 353 program, the memo also endorsed the use of special assessment districts to make redevelopment self-financing. Zoning would take the form of planned unit developments, enabling private developers and the city to negotiate terms. Transit-oriented development would be encouraged, and where applicable, the city would use Missouri’s Planned Industrial Expansion legislation to spur industrial development when private financing was not feasible. Each redevelopment district would also have a citizens’ advisory council to ensure the fair treatment of current residents.

Depletion areas marked the biggest break from past policy, at least rhetorically. These were identified as “areas of spotty City services and red lining—where large numbers of the unemployed, the elderly and the recipients of welfare are left to wait for assistance which does not seem to be forthcoming.” No depletion areas were identified specifically, but the memo noted that in 1971 there were 3,200 abandoned buildings in the city, and “virtually all of these were located in Depletion Areas.” Then as now, the majority of abandoned buildings in St. Louis were located on the North Side. The memo’s description of depletion areas acknowledged the hardships faced by residents due to the absence of both private and public investment, but it warned that the need for total reconstruction and the absence of resources put the city in a bind: “Simply stated, the City cannot abandon those trapped in Depletion areas, nor can it ignore the eventual need for complete redevelopment of these areas.”

Depletion areas, the memo recommended continuing basic services but prohibiting scattershot redevelopment. The memo was insistent that essential services should be continued: “Police, fire and sanitation service cannot be curtailed prematurely, as has been the case, according to critics, in these areas.” However, the memo called for a “no growth policy until firm market and adequate public resources are available,” requiring any new development in these areas to be planned concurrently with capital improvements—investments that would be prioritized first in designated redevelopment areas and only later in depletion areas, when market demand had returned. In the meantime, the city would use its Land Reutilization Authority as a land bank, gathering parcels through tax foreclosure and holding them indefinitely until market conditions permitted large-scale redevelopment of the area. The city would not seek to accelerate abandonment, avoiding strict code enforcement in depletion areas for this reason, but it would also refrain from selling individual parcels or allowing homesteading.

The Case for Urban Triage

In 1975, a leading national scholar applied a memorable label to the kind of strategy that Team Four recommended: “urban triage.” The term “triage” comes originally from the French trier, meaning...
to pick or cull. To triage meant to sort goods by quality, usually into three classes: best, middling, and worst.63 During World War I, triage became associated specifically with the sorting of medical patients during emergencies.64 Unable to treat everyone, doctors on the battlefield sorted incoming patients into one of three categories: those with minor injuries who could go without immediate treatment; those seriously injured who might survive if treated immediately; and those gravely wounded and unlikely to survive, regardless of treatment. In an effort to save the most lives, doctors gave priority attention to the second group—those most likely to benefit from treatment—rather than the third group—those in greatest need. Thus, to triage came to mean not just to sort patients but to prioritize care according to a utilitarian ethic, saving the greatest number of lives possible in a crisis, even at the expense of care for the most badly injured.

In the 1970s, this definition of triage was transmuted first to social policy and then to urban policy. A 1974 essay in *Time* argued that foreign food aid should be allocated not strictly on the basis of need but where it could do the most good—countries that had sufficient infrastructure and stability to distribute the needed aid effectively.65 It called this triage. In 1975, Anthony Downs, a renowned scholar of urban policy and public administration who was then serving as president of the Real Estate Research Corporation in Chicago, became the first to apply the metaphor to the urban crisis.66 He likened the city to a battlefield, with dozens of neighborhoods in need of urgent care but with too few resources available to save them all. In order to save the greatest share of the city as possible, he argued, policy makers had to strategize, giving priority to those areas experiencing slight decline over those that were already severely abandoned.

Downs called this strategy “urban triage” and promoted it as a response to the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program.67 The CDBG program had been established the year prior by title I of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974.68 It consolidated eight categorical programs—model cities, urban renewal, open space, urban beautification, historic preservation, neighborhood facilities, water, and sewer—into a single block grant, giving cities the authority to decide which program goals to emphasize and where. The legislation specified that cities should give “maximum feasible priority to activities which will benefit low and moderate-income families or aid in the prevention of slums and blight,” but the proportion of funds that had to be spent on low-income versus moderate-income families was not specified, giving cities considerable flexibility in how they allocated the grants.69

The new law was representative of President Richard Nixon’s “New Federalism,” which devolved federal authority to local governments and shifted power from the central cities of the northeast and Midwest to their suburbs and the Sun Belt.70 Previously the main beneficiaries of federal urban aid, older industrial cities lost funding in the new allocation. This transfer of benefits occurred despite growing need in older central cities like St. Louis, which in the early 1970s experienced accelerating population loss and job loss. Unable to address the full scope of the urban crisis with limited federal aid or their own resources, older central cities were forced to invest strategically and partner with the private sector to leverage scarce funds.71 Knowing that cities could not redevelop every neighborhood in need, Downs advised investing resources in the neighborhoods that could be saved most efficiently in order to produce the greatest impact.

Following an urban triage strategy would require categorizing the health of neighborhoods just as doctors categorized the health of patients.72 To determine whether a neighborhood was healthy, ill, or terminal, Downs developed a classification system based on five indicators of neighborhood decline: decreasing socioeconomic status; ethnic change from white to minority occupancy; physical deterioration and decay of housing and infrastructure; increased pessimism about the area’s future among residents, investors, and public officials; and economic disinvestment, leading to tax foreclosure and abandonment.73 Based on the values of these criteria, neighborhoods could be classified into one of five stages. Stage 1 neighborhoods were labeled “healthy.” These areas were in good condition, middle or upper class, and predominately white. Stages 2 and 3 neighborhoods were
labeled “in-between.” These areas were beginning to show signs of neglect but could be restored to stage 1 status through home repair, code enforcement, and other rehabilitation programs. Stages 4 and 5 neighborhoods were labeled “deteriorated.” These areas were marked by high rates of crime, high rates of poverty, and widespread vacancy and abandonment. Once a neighborhood had fallen to stage 4 or stage 5, Downs argued, nothing short of total clearance and redevelopment could return it to “healthy” stage 1 status.

Downs’s understanding of neighborhood change was essentially the same as Harland Bartholomew’s in 1947, but his strategic advice about how to prioritize spending reflected the new fiscal politics of the 1970s and the perceived failure of many clearance and redevelopment projects.  The most cost-effective strategy, Downs argued, would be to concentrate spending in areas with only moderate decline, where a minor infusion of resources might lead to significant improvement by restoring investor confidence and sparking private actors to contribute to the upgrading of their own neighborhoods. Slum clearance, by contrast, was a costly and risky proposition. It would have to be preceded by partial or total clearance of blight through demolition. Even then, redevelopment would only succeed if the blighted area were adjacent to a more stable neighborhood—isolated urban renewal projects often failed. Fiscally constrained cities could therefore ill afford to prioritize clearance and redevelopment at a time when even the strongest urban neighborhoods were threatened by the encroachment of blight.

Yet, realizing that politicians would be under pressure to spend funds everywhere, Downs developed spending recommendations for all neighborhood types. Healthy neighborhoods would receive the least funding; only low-cost, high-visibility projects, like planting trees and providing new street furniture, would be approved if politically necessary. More funding would be directed to very deteriorated areas, but only for demolition and the provision of social welfare. In these areas, gradual abandonment would continue, but the city would maintain public services and increase social welfare along the lines of the Model Cities program. The greatest share of funds would be targeted to in-between areas for physical redevelopment, where public spending could not only reduce blight but also induce further investment from the private sector, thereby maximizing the value of the public’s investment. Downs called this three-part strategy, balancing the desire for efficiency with political need, “modified triage.”

The Case against Triage

Anthony Downs and Team Four Inc. both cast their claims in utilitarian terms: a strategy of triage, they argued, would produce the greatest good for the greatest number. What neither considered in their proposals was the racial fairness of targeting resources in this way. In fact, none of the St. Louis plans cited in this article discuss the racial implications of the policies they propose. Of the dozens of maps that appear within the 1917 Problems of St. Louis, the 1936 Urban Land Policy, the 1947 Comprehensive Plan, the 1973 Development Program, and the 1975 Draft Comprehensive Plan, not one displays the racial composition of the city’s neighborhoods. If such a map had been included, it would show a city starkly divided by race. As Figure 4 shows, in 1970, the city’s South Side was almost entirely white. The city’s black population was concentrated on the North Side in a contiguous band of census tracts stretching from the central business district to the city’s western limits. This racially segregated geography was rendered invisible in the city’s plans. But by the mid-1970s, this long-standing practice of ignoring race as a consideration in planning was becoming politically untenable, as activists pointed out the biased effects of ostensibly color-blind policies.

Signs of this shift were evident by 1973, when John Poelker won election as mayor. The St. Louis Development Program, released earlier that year, had been greeted warmly in some quarters. In an editorial dated January 26, 1973, the conservative St. Louis Globe-Democrat commended the planning director, Norman Murdoch, for his willingness to put neighborhood conservation first: “The
city can’t do everything at once—it must establish priorities, beginning with areas that are still salvageable from decay.’’ But black activists were wary of any plan that appeared to privilege the rehabilitation of the South Side over the more distressed and predominantly black North Side. In November 1973, the *St. Louis Argus*, a black-owned newspaper, pushed back against two board bills that purportedly called for a large-scale program of housing rehabilitation on the South Side and an equally large program of housing demolition on the North Side. When the Poelker administration released its first CDBG application, black activists protested again, arguing that it failed to target sufficient funds to North Side wards. They argued that aid should be distributed based on need, not market demand.

These early signs of discontent with the city’s planning policies exploded in 1975 after a political operative leaked details of Team Four’s “City Wide Implementation Strategies” memo to Philip Sutin, a reporter at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Sutin requested a copy of the memo and the most recent draft of the Comprehensive Plan from the mayor’s office. Mayor Poelker, who was in an ongoing spat with the newspaper, refused to provide it. The newspaper then filed a federal Freedom of Information Act request with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which provided a copy of the memo to the newspaper. On May 19, 1975, the *Post-Dispatch* went to press with the headline, “Plan Said to Hurt Black Area in City,” igniting a popular uproar.

The *Post-Dispatch*’s article characterized the “Team Four Plan” as a strategy to reduce services to the predominantly black North Side in order to depopulate the area. Sutin reported that Team Four was recommending that “deteriorating areas on their way to abandonment get only a minimum level of services.” Quoting black community leaders, Sutin reported the plan “could spell doom” for “an area generally bounded by Twentieth Street, Delmar Boulevard, Natural Bridge Avenue and the western city limits”—an area on the North Side that planners had largely labeled “obsolete” or “blighted” in 1947 and in need of “reconstruction” in 1973 but was, according to a black leader quoted in the newspaper, still home to roughly 166,000 residents in 1975. Former Alderman C. B. Broussard, a black Democratic leader in the twenty-sixth ward, asserted that the city had already adopted Team Four’s policies but would not admit it: “It’s happening without a doubt.” The article closed with a fateful quote from Alderman Milton F. Svetanics, of the twenty-seventh ward, defending the plan. He argued, “We have to make a choice about which areas we want to save. Other areas will have to suffer benign neglect.”

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Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then serving in the Nixon administration as counselor to the
president for Urban Affairs, had coined the phrase “benign neglect” in 1970 in a memo to the pres-
ident on the “Status of Negroes.”83 In the memo, which was leaked to the New York Times and pub-
lished on March 1, 1970, Moynihan argued that despite an increase in female-headed households and
the high incidence of “anti-social behavior among young black males,” social and economic con-
ditions for blacks were improving overall. “The time may have come,” he concluded, “when the
issue of race could benefit from a period of ‘benign neglect.’ . . . We may need a period in which
Negro progress continues and racial rhetoric fades.”84 Moynihan apparently intended the memo as a
rebuke to Vice President Spiro Agnew, whose racially charged rhetoric was inflaming tensions with
the black community, but instead the memo itself became a symbol of such rhetoric. The memo was
widely denounced; critics accused the Nixon administration of treating the black community’s con-
cerns, in policy and in rhetoric, with “benign neglect.”85

Although the term never appeared in the Team Four memo, “benign neglect” quickly became the
rallying cry against it. After the Post-Dispatch published its story, 200 people met at the St. Louis
Urban League offices to protest the plan and form a coalition to organize against it. At the meeting,
civil rights leader Ernest Calloway—now an assistant professor of urban affairs at St. Louis Univers-
ity and a member of the city’s Community Development Commission—said that St. Louis banks
and insurance companies had followed an implicit policy of “benign neglect” of the black commu-
nity for many years, “and many feel it has been the city policy too.”86 At a later meeting, Alder-
woman JoAnne Wayne of the first ward warned that the “Team Four Plan” was designed to
place the black community from St. Louis: “The Team Four plan is a strategy to get rid of blacks,
and baby, if we don’t get together and really stick together, we’ll be . . . well, not right here in the
city of St. Louis. I don’t know where we’ll be.”87 The St. Louis Argus, a black newspaper, charac-
terized it as “the so-called Plan Four proposal designed to lift essential city services and let the near-
North side of St. Louis die.”88 In July 1975, the Ad-hoc Committee against Team Four Projec-
tions—formed by the Federation of Block Units Inc.; Yeatmen District Community Corp.; and
Jeff-Vander-Lou Inc.—circulated a petition opposing the plan. It stated, “We are disappointed and
disgusted that we still have policies of benign neglect, and it appears that many neighborhoods will
be destroyed.” The petition continued, “150,000 families are threatened with displacement as part
of the plan.”89

In point of fact, Team Four’s memo did not specify the size or location of any depletion areas.
The authors were also clear that essential services like police and fire must not be reduced.90 How-
ever, the memo did define depletion areas as neighborhoods with significant housing abandonment.
As Figure 5 shows, in the mid-1970s, the most distressed housing stock in St. Louis was located
almost exclusively in black, North side wards. Likewise, the memo links redevelopment areas to the
Chapter 353 program. In 1975, that program had been used almost exclusively in the central corri-
dor. So, while the memo’s recommendations were color-blind in construction, based on the descrip-
tions of neighborhood types in the memo and the distribution of population and abandonment in
St. Louis, neighborhoods that would qualify for “depletion” would likely be predominantly black
and on the North Side.91 Black leaders who read the memo inferred the racial bias of the recommen-
dations on this basis, linking it to their previous experience of displacement as a consequence of
urban renewal.

The Community Development Commission’s attempts to contain the crisis were not successful.
Initially, it tried to ignore the controversy, refusing to publicly release copies of the memo after the
first Post-Dispatch story went to press. After a week, the commission partially reversed course, pro-
viding copies to four aldermen. It did not permit Team Four Inc. to release the full memo publicly
until February 1976.92 By then, the memo’s reputation as a “secret plan” was firmly set. The com-
mission also tried to mollify critics by tweaking the language of the 1975 “Interim Comprehensive
Plan.” When the Community Development Commission released the third draft of the plan for
Figure 5. Residential quality, city of St. Louis, 1973. Source: St. Louis City Plan Commission, St. Louis Development Program (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis City Plan Commission, June 1973), 36.
public comment in June 1975, it included a prefatory statement that said the commission “rejects any plan, draft or strategy which advocates any no-growth philosophy or any form of discrimination as to race, age, sex or creed.”93 The commission also modified the plan itself, removing references to “abandonment” and deleting the map, printed previously in the 1973 Development Program, that identified areas of the city for either conservation, rehabilitation and reconstruction, or maintenance and improvement.94 These changes were not sufficient to allay protestors’ concerns. By the time, Team Four Inc. publicly released the memo with a defense of its recommendations, Mayor Poelker had abandoned the effort to adopt the “Interim Comprehensive Plan.”95

Conclusion

Despite not being adopted, the fallout from the “Team Four Plan” persists. As recently as 2008, US Representative Maxine Waters held a Congressional field hearing in St. Louis to investigate the legacy of the “Team Four Plan.”96 Barbara A. Geisman, then serving as executive director for Community Development for the city of St. Louis, testified that the “Team Four Plan” had no influence over city policy: “I have never read it and I don’t know anybody else who has ever read it, and it really isn’t relevant to anything that we have been doing for the past seven years.”97 Nevertheless, a series of speakers testified that St. Louis’ development patterns from the 1970s to the 2000s reflected the spirit of the “Team Four Plan,” if not the letter, noting that St. Louis’ central corridor had experienced a revival after decades of reinvestment but that the North Side continued to decline.

Black leaders also linked specific policy decisions—in particular, Mayor James Conway’s decision in 1979 to close Homer G. Phillips, a well-regarded public hospital on the North Side that was considered “the crown jewel of the entire black community”—to the enduring influence of Team Four.98 The hearing ultimately concluded that St. Louis officials had not, in fact, adopted the “Team Four Plan,” openly or secretly, but journalists and activists continue to invoke it as a symbol of institutional indifference to the impoverished black communities of the North Side.99

Scholars are also revisiting this once forgotten story as a case study in strategic geographic investment.100 In chronically shrinking cities like St. Louis, plans today often proceed from the same assumptions that undergirded the “Team Four Plan”: the need for public investment is widespread, but funding is scarce and most effective when targeted. That last assumption has been bolstered by a series of recent studies that confirm the intuitive logic of targeting: when public investments are sufficiently concentrated and sustained, private actors invest as well.101 Yet, even for those who still find the case for triage compelling, the history of “Team Four Plan” should hold two cautionary lessons. The first is a familiar but significant one: “color-blind” policies are not necessarily race neutral in effect. In cities like St. Louis, where race corresponds with neighborhood condition, policies to geographically target investment cannot rest on neighborhood condition alone. Planners must also consider racial equity as a factor in investment. As critics of the “Team Four Plan” made clear, to do otherwise risks excluding minority populations from the opportunity to rehabilitate their neighborhoods.

The second lesson, which hindsight reveals, is that triage is not a logically complete approach to planning. The “Team Four Plan” rationalized the exclusion of some neighborhoods from physical redevelopment, but it offered no alternative path to revitalization. It still assumed that market demand would ultimately return, and when it did, “depletion” areas would need to be cleared in order to be redeveloped. This logic would consign “depletion” areas to a perpetual holding pattern, denying residents the agency and the resources to make their neighborhoods livable in the interim. Forty years later, with St. Louis and cities like it still in decline, it’s not clear that market demand ever will return to all distressed neighborhoods. This makes it all the more important to reimagine what a livable future might look like for these neighborhoods and the residents who remain, even if that future looks nothing like the past.
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Notes

11. Ibid., 32.
12. Ibid.
15. Gordon, Mapping Decline, 167–68; St. Louis City Plan Commission, St. Louis Development Program (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis City Plan Commission, 1973), 20–22.


22. Ibid., 157.

23. Lang, Grassroots at the Gateway, 139–40.


26. Ibid., 152.


33. St. Louis City Plan Commission, St. Louis Development Program, 30.


36. Ibid., vii.


38. This description of the Development Program comes from the “Interim Comprehensive Plan” that followed it: St. Louis Community Development Commission, Interim Comprehensive Plan: Draft III (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis Community Development Commission, 1975), 1.

39. St. Louis City Plan Commission, St. Louis Development Program, 105.


45. Team Four Inc., Citywide Implementation Strategies, 1976, front matter, i.

46. Ibid., 49–51.

47. Ibid., 3.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 4.

50. Ibid., 4–6.

51. Ibid., 7.

52. Gordon, Mapping Decline, 162.

53. Ibid., 164–65.


55. Ibid., 15.

56. Ibid., 17.


58. Ibid., 15.

59. Ibid., 16.

60. Ibid., 15.

61. Ibid., 15–30.


64. Downs, “Using the Lessons of Experience,” 18.


67. Ibid., 1.

68. For a full discussion of the Community Development Block Grant program, see Richard P. Nathan et al., Block Grants for Community Development (Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1977), 16–74.


76. Ibid., 18.


84. Ibid.


88. “Block Units Strongly Oppose Plan Four,” *St. Louis Argus*, June 19, 1975, 16B.


96. Michael R. Allen, “Congressional Hearing Spotlights Moving from ‘Team Four’ to North Side Development,” St. Louis American, March 12, 2008, accessed July 18, 2015, http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/article_5b91e991-77fa-53f0-88fa-b2b4ad5e6e2.html. The hearing was held at the request of the US Representative from St. Louis, William Lacy Clay Jr. In her opening remarks, Waters noted that despite being a St. Louis native, she was not familiar with the “Team Four Plan” herself: “I can tell you that even though I hail from here, I confess to not knowing a lot about the Team 4 plan before Mr. Clay approached me about holding this hearing.” In The Use of Federal Housing and Economic Development Funds in St. Louis: From “Team 4” into the Future, 3.

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