

NIGHTMARE ON VINE STREET

Jonathan Diskin

Thomas A. Dutton

Laure Quinlivan's documentary, *Visions of Vine Street*, recently won a prestigious Peabody Award and has become the iconic centerpiece of media representation of Over-the-Rhine. The piece has garnered much attention since its first showing last November, owing mostly to the exquisite sense of public relations of Quinlivan and WCPO (Channel 9). The station aired the one-hour documentary three times without commercial interruptions. WCET (Channel 48) recently got into the act, hosting a roundtable discussion with Quinlivan and others who have an interest in Vine Street and Over-the-Rhine. Vine Street is now the talk of the town. As Mayor Charlie Luken says in the video, "There is no more important street in Cincinnati than Vine Street."

The video seems to have received no critical review. At the risk of spoiling what has been to this point a love fest, a Cleo Award for best infomercial might have been the more appropriate recognition, for *Visions of Vine Street* is little more than an advertisement for City Councilman Jim Tarbell's vision for Vine Street and Over-the-Rhine.

Rather than present an evenhanded look at diverse views, *Visions of Vine Street* hammers away in the overheated rhetoric of the TV expose to reveal its preconceived "vision." This revelatory style of journalism substitutes form for substance. It compensates for its lacks of analysis by repeating tired positions and recycling proposals for change in a loud tone of *shocking revelations!*

The complexity of history, social movements and different understandings of what constitutes good development are shoehorned into a good guy/bad guy dichotomy. The rhetoric of the exposé pits the glorious vision of Tarbell and some star developers against the misguided forces of low-income housing non-profits, Buddy Gray, and a seemingly inept city bureaucracy. Serious and socially useful analyses are the victims of this ideological refusal to put urban development in its



many contexts.

Good Visions, Bad Visions

In the first of many unsupported statements, Quinlivan pronounces Tarbell “an authority on Over-the-Rhine,” though she gives no evidence of expertise beyond the fact that he lives in Over-the-Rhine, rides his bike, and cares about the neighborhood. Tarbell’s vision draws on the imagery of Vine Street’s Germanic past and seeks the return of its “glory days.” If his vision of Vine is the good, then it “collides,” as Quinlivan says, “with the vision of this man—Buddy Gray.”

According to the documentary, Vine Street today is exactly what buddy Gray envisioned: a street rife with abandoned property and the very poor. But *Visions of Vine Street* grossly misrepresents Gray’s vision, echoing the consistent misunderstanding promulgated by Zane Miller and Bruce Tucker’s influential *Changing Plans for America’s Inner Cities*, that Buddy Gray “saw Vine Street (and Over-the-Rhine more generally) as a haven for poor people.”

Quinlivan uncritically repeats the views of Miller and Tucker, who mistake Buddy Gray’s vision as a “racially and socio-economically separatist attempt to commit the city to maintaining Over-the-Rhine as a predominantly black and overwhelmingly poor enclave.” These positions are patently false. Quinlivan offers no evidence for what she takes to be “Buddy’s vision.” Her presumptuous assertions merely repeat stereotypes of a man who cannot defend himself since he was tragically killed in 1996.

Buddy Gray’s vision was always about developing Over-the-Rhine as a mixed racial and income neighborhood. It was about equitable and inclusive development. That he had sided with the poor to help them develop their own voice as a political force is not the same as saying their interests alone constitute a



good neighborhood.

Quinlivan, Miller, and Tucker make the conceptual mistake of assuming that speaking for the powerless is somehow speaking for separatism. Frankly, it is downright repulsive to have to constantly respond to accusations that Gray considered poverty a “lifestyle choice” or desired the status quo. “Buddy used to keep developers out...by organizing protests of any plan to gentrify the neighborhood,” Quinlivan says. The second clause of that quote is closer to the truth, because buddy gray did organize against gentrification.

But for Gray and other neighborhood leaders in the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement, gentrification and development are not the same. The flip side of gentrification is displacement and homelessness. Gentrification refers to the displacement of the poor as a neighborhood becomes a hot spot for upscale development. Buddy Gray understood that gentrification is a market-based process, often encouraged by the city and occurring at the expense of the poor. This is what he meant when he said, “What will happen is the same thing that’s happened in every historic district in the U.S.; prices rise, land speculation increases because it’s fashionable, poor people can’t stay in the neighborhood.”

Certainly Gray organized against gentrification; he worked to ensure the poor would have a home in Over-the-Rhine and development would be inclusive and just.

Good Developers, Bad Developers

In Quinlivan’s rendering, these visions are played out by more practical folks: developers. To complement the good vision, we have the heroic developers who have transformed Main Street. “The buildings on Main Street used to look like the buildings on Vine...but developers took the abandoned shells and rehabbed them into great living spaces,” Quinlivan intones. The handiwork



of upscale developers Bill Baum, Chris Frutkin, and others are described as “fabulous” spaces and New York style lofts; their work evokes rapture from Quinlivan.

On the other side of the ledger stands ReSTOC, who—she again tells us without evidence—fears development and has single-handedly blocked development on Vine. In contrast to the praise heaped upon Main Street developers, *Visions of Vine Street* denigrates ReSTOC without any real knowledge or discussion of its work.

This single-minded focus is on display when Quinlivan and Tarbell stand on Vine Street looking at a sign for ReSTOC’s latest development project, carping, “A sign does not a building make.” Yet right behind them is Buddy’s Place, a successful ReSTOC project. Buddy’s Place mixes housing with a storefront leased to Miami University’s Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine. Earlier this year the center housed an artistic installation designed by Miami architecture students to showcase the work of local photographer Jimmy Heath and the students of his Center for Community Photography in Over-the-Rhine.

Artist Suzanne Fisher is now working with young and old residents of the community to design and build a mosaic park bench for Washington Park. Coordinated as a collaboration between Fisher, the Peaslee Neighborhood Center, the Art Academy of Cincinnati, and Miami University, the park bench is just one example of the People’s Mosaic Project, with other projects starting this summer. Apparently it would have spoiled the symmetry of good against bad for the documentary to note ReSTOC’s success at bringing abandoned buildings back into productive and creative use.

Quinlivan could have compared ReSTOC’s subsidies, which are not principally funded by local taxes—contrary to *Visions of Vine Street’s* implication—with subsidies received by Baum,



Arn Bortz, and other market rate developers. She could have inquired whether ReSTOC's projects took longer on average than other comparable projects pieced together by volunteer labor and multiple sources of financing. Instead she chose to stand and mock with Tarbell, who has opposed ReSTOC's recent project from the start.

Good Propaganda, Bad Journalism— Journalism As Propaganda

One consequence of the simplistic representation of Over-the-Rhine as a battle between good and bad is shortcomings can be conveniently blamed on the bad. This absolves Quinlivan of any messy historical analysis. Instead, groups such as ReSTOC as well as the city bear the lion's share of blame for Vine Street's appearance. Surely public policy is not without blame in any reasonable explanation of the rise of late twentieth century urban ghettos in the United States, but Quinlivan provides no historical context for understanding the wider structural forces that have shaped Over-the-Rhine. She says nothing about the disastrous effects of suburbanization, urban renewal, the de-industrialization of the economy, and the shredding of the so-called safety net by the rise of neo-conservatism in politics, to name a few. Low-income housing is a symptom of larger forces, not the cause of disinvestment in Over-the-Rhine (as we have argued elsewhere: <http://www.citybeat.com/2001-10-11/editorial.shtml>).

Quinlivan's lack of analysis is also clear in the 10 solutions she offers at the end of the show. Most of the points are not bad per se; they are just simple-minded, the equivalent of low hanging fruit. None of Quinlivan's solutions address the more fundamental issues: declining wages, the disappearance of jobs with actual futures for low-skilled workers, poor education, persistent patterns of racial discrimination in all walks of life, and government rollbacks in social services.



In the end, *Visions of Vine Street* dramatically lobbies for a particular point of view while masquerading as investigative reporting. This effective piece of propaganda operates, as they all do, by claiming the high ground in general, abstract terms in a way that makes all opponents traitors to common sense and human decency: *We are all for God, country and condos on Vine Street!*

If one thinks this is overstatement, consider *Cincinnati Enquirer* writer John Kiesewetter's account of how WCPO sees the role of the documentary: "Bill Fee, Channel 9 vice president and general manager, says the documentary signals an expansion of the I-Team's mission from investigative journalism into 'constructive journalism,' another element of the station's new '9 On Your Side' branding." Who precisely is the "your" in this case? *Visions of Vine Street* is replete with misrepresentations, selective history, one-sided points of view, and assertions without evidence. The rhetorical structure of good versus bad creates the illusion of substance. This is a shame, as television galvanizes attention like no other media.

The debates we really need about Over-the-Rhine and Cincinnati should revolve around what inclusive development entails and how to incorporate the heroic work of low-income institutions that have been toiling for years with little public or financial support to create a broader—and not a more polarized—community. The rhetoric of *Visions of Vine Street* unfortunately adds unnecessarily to the very polarization that we should be working to overcome.



Jonathan Diskin, Associate Professor of Economics

*Department of Social Sciences
Earlham College*

Thomas A. Dutton, Director

*The Miami University Center for Community
Engagement in Over-the-Rhine*

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