Heritage Under the Exit Ramps: Highway Construction and “Historic” Neighborhoods in Indianapolis

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I would like to:

i. present in person (with/without a written paper)

Abstract (300 words):

The US Federal Highway Act was signed into law by President Eisenhower in 1956, and many American cities utilized highway construction as a mechanism to displace African Americans and immigrants, regarded as “undesirables,” from the urban core. Today, even though other American municipalities now recognize the folly of building thoroughfares that cut across cities, disrupting urban space and creating physical boundaries that pose a challenge to redevelopment, Indianapolis is determined to rebuild and expand two highways that bisect the city center. In this presentation, I share accounts of two communities whose existence was, in one case, almost erased by highway construction and, in the other, was ruthlessly compromised. In the first instance, I tell the story of a neighborhood that was once home to both African American migrants and European Jewish immigrants, who shared bonds of friendship and mutual
cooperation for over five decades up until highway construction dislodged both residents and businesses in the 1970s. In the other case, the current highway expansion plans imperil the very existence of Ransom Place, a 19th century neighborhood that was almost destroyed the first time around when the highway was originally built. Ransom Place is of enormous symbolic significance to Indianapolis' Black community, as it remains the most intact area associated with African-American settlement. In addition to compromising what remains of Ransom Place, these new plans also endanger the integrity of the newly gentrified, largely white, neighborhoods that throng the central business district. In this presentation, I show how, as downtowns are currently being reinvented and revitalized, notions of “heritage” and history are strategically mobilized in defense of the unique character of these zones, in contradistinction to the earlier period, when the removal of Black and immigrant neighborhoods became part of a triumphalist narrative of slum clearance and urban renewal.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Susan Hyatt is professor and Chair of the Anthropology Department at Indiana University Indianapolis. She has directed ethnographic research projects in a series of neighborhoods in Indianapolis, working in partnership with students and local community organizations. The most prominent of these endeavors focused on the history of a unique multiethnic community that was largely erased by 1960s interstate highway construction. She often collaborates with her colleague, Professor Paul Mullins. Mullins’ research focuses on urban displacement in Indianapolis, examining how a century-old, predominantly African-American community was displaced. His scholarship includes archaeological excavations, documentary research, and oral histories that illuminate the legacy of urban renewal and the erasure of African-American life in the near-Westside of Indianapolis. In 2016, colleagues Hyatt and Mullins were jointly awarded the inaugural Charles R. Bantz Community Fellowship to support their project, “Invisible Indianapolis: Race, Heritage and Community Memory in the Circle City.” “Invisible Indianapolis” examines history and material culture in neighborhoods that otherwise do not appear to be of historical significance, thereby underscoring stories of American life in seemingly prosaic places that have actually been significantly shaped and transformed by such processes as real estate “redlining,” racial and religious discrimination, postwar highway construction, and gentrification.