

JBG Commission (2012 and 2014) Artist Statement — Gail Rebhan

I received commissions in 2012 and 2014 to create photo-collages that examine the cultural history of eleven locations developed or pending development by JBG Companies. I create the photo-collages by blending archival and contemporary photographs. Historical newspaper articles, maps, and advertisements are incorporated. Text is integrated into the image. Extensive research using primary and secondary sources goes into each piece. Using layers of various opacities, I convey a fluid sense of time and place. The impact of the past on the present is palpable

Cities evolve and change due to shifting societal values, desires, government actions, and market forces. In urban areas, the past coexists and informs the present. This work is an unsentimental look at past and present Washington, D.C. and Arlington, Virginia.

I moved to the Washington, D.C. area in 1969. This was the summer before my junior year in high school and a year after the April 1968 riots that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Washington has been home except for my time in college and graduate school. Even though I had a working knowledge of Washington history, I learned a great deal while researching and creating these photo-collages.

Most memorable to me is gaining a new understanding of the severe and lasting impact of the 1968 riots. Large areas of Washington slid into decline, of course, but it has taken literally decades for many neighborhoods to recover. The north side of the 800 block of New Jersey Avenue NW was a vibrant area from the late 1800's through the 1960's. City directories list nothing in that area from 1970 until 2012 when the block was undergoing redevelopment. At 7th and K Streets NW the reopening of the Hahn Shoes store four months after the riots was so newsworthy that it was reported in The Washington Post. 14th and U Streets NW from the 1920's through the 1960's was the cultural focal point of Washington's African-American community. In 1968 it became the center of the riots. By 1971 less than a third of the businesses along the 14th street corridor remained. In 1986 construction of the District of Columbia Reeves Center for Municipal Affairs became a catalyst for redevelopment of that neighborhood.

I was also surprised to learn how government action precipitated the removal of diverse ethnic groups from their neighborhoods. The construction of Union Station in 1907 displaced an Irish community. The redevelopment of southwest Washington in the 1950's demolished established African-American and Jewish neighborhoods.

At the Arlington site I found a fascinating history that included Civil War balloon ascensions, over eighty years as the First Presbyterian Church of Arlington, and then over forty years as Bob Peck Chevrolet dealership. Now the site is a LEED certified mixed-use office building.

While this project is specific to Washington metro area, it is emblematic of changes to many cities throughout the United States.

Currently the work exists as archival pigment prints.