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# Roanoke Atones for Urban Renewal—Artistically

A new exhibit brings to life a lost black neighborhood and implicitly criticizes the misbegotten policies that destroyed it.

Howard Husock - October 23, 2023

Discussions of the ill effects of public housing, urban renewal, and urban freeways usually focus on big cities: the Chicago-lakefront hellhole called the Robert Taylor Homes, now-demolished; Robert Moses's Cross-Bronx Expressway, which tore through the heart of that borough; the brutalist Boston Government Center, which replaced the vibrant Scollay Square. But a moving new exhibit reminds us that these misbegotten policies and projects transformed neighborhoods across the country, especially in small cities in the South. Roanoke, Virginia, the "Star City," is atoning for its sins by honoring an artist whose life was changed by them.

David Ramey: Gainsboro Road and Beyond, shared between the Taubman Museum of Art and the Harrison Museum of African American Culture, both in Roanoke, exhibits the self-taught artist's portrayals of the neighborhood in which he grew up before it was cleared for a highway, civic center, and two public housing projects. "Historic Gainsboro" captures in ink and colored-pencil detail the homes, shops, churches, and social clubs—the rich social capital—of a neighborhood literally on the other side of the Norfolk and Western tracks from Roanoke's white downtown, before it joined so many black neighborhoods in being branded a slum and sacrificed to bulldozers. Ramey's portrayals remind one of the vanished worlds of other majority-black neighborhoods—Detroit's Black Bottom, Chicago's Bronzeville, and Pittsburgh's Hill District, the setting of playwright August Wilson's greatest works.

Ramey (1939–2017) made his hundreds of drawings in his retirement years following a career as a railroad conductor. His son, David Ramey Jr., has carefully archived and loaned them to the two institutions staging the exhibit. The drawings provide detailed portrayals of people Ramey knew in movie-still-like action: Doctor Brooks of the Brooks Drug Store on Henry Street, the owners of Louise and Lillian's Beauty salon, Big Nick of Weeby's Groceries, and more. Shadow and reflection play across the pastels.


"Last Day" by David Ramey (Collection of David A. Ramey, Jr. © David A. Ramey, Sr., LLC)

Willers, chief curator of the Taubman Museum (itself an impressive structure designed by Randall Stout, under the influence of Frank Gehry and a surprising presence alongside the tracks in Roanoke), marvels particularly at how Ramey "worked entirely from memory. He had no photographs. But when older visitors look at the drawings, they recognize specific people and places."

Ramey himself enriches such memories with handwritten stories that accompany the drawings. His writing is almost as affecting as the drawings: "I went to Dr. Brooks several times to apply for a job delivering medicine on my bicycle. I was about ten or eleven and he always told me I wasn't old enough. I was eager to work and make me some money although the job paid only a dollar and fi□y cents a day. At that time, to me that was a lot of money. Next door in a very small portion of the building was the pie man's shop."

The exhibit is a record, as well, of how much community life and wealth was plowed under by destructive urban policies. Charles Price, chair of the board of the Museum of African-American Culture, recalls homeownership as being common in Gainsboro. "My grandmother owned her own her home; so did one of my two aunts who lived there," he says.

Urban renewal imposed disruption on an immense scale for a city with a population of 97,000 in 1960. From 1955 through the 1970s, the so-called Commonwealth Project and successor initiatives used eminent domain and federal funds to demolish some 1,600 homes, as well as 24 churches and 200 businesses, in Gainsboro and the adjacent Northeast neighborhood. These were replaced by a highway, a Holiday Inn, a Ford dealership, a civic center, and the

Lincoln Terrace public housing project, according to reporter Mary Bishop's impressive 1995 Roanoke Times special section, "How Urban Renewal Uprooted Black Roanoke."

"Beauty Salon" by David Ramey (Collection of David A. Ramey, Jr. © David A. Ramey, Sr., LLC)

Thus, the Ramey show serves as a reminder of the loss both of community and of black wealth. Public housing in Roanoke, as elsewhere, forced one-time homeowners, with minimal compensation, into projects where only the government could be an owner. Many residents lost both their neighborhood and the future appreciation of their properties, which, notes Charles Price, would be valuable today on the basis of the land alone because of its proximity to a revived Roanoke downtown.

It is a commonplace to blame the Federal Housing Administration's practice of neighborhood redlining, which denied blacks mortgages, for a large portion of the black-white wealth gap. Public housing, disproportionately black then and now, must share part of the blame, too.

That two small city institutions would combine to mount this Ramey show makes the achievement even more impressive. It deserves a grant to enable production of a formal exhibition catalog, along with a reproduction of the 1995 Roanoke Times section. It deserves to travel, including to the National Museum of African-American History and Culture. Ramey may have been an outsider artist, but he deserves a place in Americans' hearts.