FIFTY YEARS AGO, THE CORRIDOR BURNED. TODAY, FOR BETTER OR WORSE, IT’S THE CROWN JEWEL OF A GILDED AGE. NO ONE KNEW IT AT THE TIME, BUT THE SEEDS OF THAT CHANGE WERE PLANTED WHILE THE RUBBLE WAS STILL SMOKING. THE STORY OF WHAT CAME NEXT—NOT JUST ONE TRANSFORMATION BUT SEVERAL—DOUBLES AS THE STORY OF DC. BY MARISA M. KASHINO ★ WASHINGTONIAN 49
Fifty years later, it’s all hard to picture. On the corner of 14th and R, studio apartments start at $2,100 a month in a building that once was a homeless shelter; on the ground floor, a Shinola store hawks $800 watches. A block away, Teslas and Range Rovers queue at the valet stand outside the French restaurant Le Diplomate, once the crumbling shell of a dry cleaner. Up at T Street, an old auto showroom used for decades as a black Pentecostal church now houses Room & Board.

Which is to say 14th Street might bustle and thrill as it once did, but it’s a very different place with a very different population. The story of how that happened can feel like a recent phenomenon, as if it only just began. In fact, you can go all the way back to 1968 and find the seeds of a spectacular comeback. They just weren’t always easy to recognize.

“DON’T MOVE,” TONY CIBEL HEARD A VOICE say. It was 1971, and Cibel was at Barrel House Liquors at 14th and Rhode Island, getting some change from the safe upstairs. He’d bought the store—with a giant, three-dimensional barrel protruding from its facade—the year before for next to nothing. Business was steady, but the clientele—prostitutes, pimps, bootleggers who bought booze by the case to resell after hours—meant that he had to put up with his share of drama. On this particular day, he heard the threat and looked over the balcony: A pair of robbers were holding up his two employees and a delivery guy.

Cibel hit the silent alarm, grabbed his gun, and ran downstairs. He fired at the robber fleeing out the back door, striking the man’s shoulder and taking him down. The other perpetrator escaped up Rhode Island, cash flying behind him, before the cops descended.

Cibel says he didn’t even bother installing bulletproof glass in front of the cash register after the incident: “The word went out—’Don’t fool with that white boy. He’ll shoot you.’ That was the end of that.”

There had been talk of rebuilding 14th Street almost immediately after the riots. Within months, city leaders and the National Capital

BY PALM SUNDAY, THE 14TH STREET CORRIDOR LAY IN RUIN. The rioting had begun three nights earlier—Thursday, April 4, 1968—as word of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination spread, the rage ripping through the street like a wildfire in a windstorm. The corridor was the main artery of black Washington in those days. DC, as it still is, was a city marred by the lingering wounds of segregation where the physical map of your daily life was determined by the color of your skin. The landscape west of Rock Creek Park was dominated by middle-class and wealthy whites. African-Americans kept mostly to the east, and 14th and U was a hub of shopping, culture, and entertainment where they owned and patronized hundreds of businesses.

Then King was killed and the neighborhood burned. As dawn broke on Palm Sunday, the wreckage sat diabolical and smoldering. The Safeway at 14th and Chapin was reduced to a pile of twisted metal and shattered glass. Gone was the Peoples drugstore at 14th and U—and the Pleasant Hill Market a few blocks north and Smith’s Pharmacy and Ripley’s clothing store. The odor of tear gas and smoke clung to everything.

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The street had been written off as full of drugs and crime. But it wasn’t entirely desolate. Barrel House Liquors did a steady business in the ’70s. Its owner stayed afloat in part by acting as his own security. Other neighbors took more creative approaches: Below, a sticker that a local group used to slap onto the cars of johns cruising for prostitutes.

Still, the cheap rent and anything-goes atmosphere were a draw for all kinds of urban pioneers who would help shape the corridor for decades to come.

Just north of U Street, activists who had moved to the neighborhood before the riots established it as a center of the Black Power movement. At the headquarters of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—the civil-rights organization that had led freedom rides, sit-ins, and voter-registration drives in the ’60s—the focus had shifted from protesting to harnessing political influence.

A group of SNCC members opened the Drum and Spear bookstore at 14th and Fairmont, a space painted bright orange whose floor-to-ceiling shelves were stocked with works by black authors and political dissidents. “Sometimes you could spot what you thought maybe was an FBI [agent] watching you, trailing you down the street,” says Charlie Cobb, one of the founders. Nearby, Gaston Neal, a poet and Black Power leader, ran the New School for Afro-American Thought, a gathering place where courses were as varied as Swahili, politics, dance, and drumming.

Young people strode the corridor with more swagger than before. “There was tremendous energy coming out of ’68 into the ’70s about how to move the community—politically, economically, and culturally,” says Courtland Cox, another Drum and Spear founder. Fourteenth Street was the incubator for people thinking much differently about the world.

The phenomenon was pan-racial. A mile south, a different counterculture began to flourish. Three white female artists who had fallen for the neighborhood’s decaying but grand old rowhouses moved in. The women—sculptor and woodworker Margery Goldberg, dancer Liz Lerman, and actress Joy Zinoman—turned multiple Victorians into studios and apartments and hired other artists with the promise of plentiful space to create whatever they wanted.

Soon, half a block was lit at all hours with gallery openings and raucous parties. “In a city like Washington, where most people were a bunch of suits, this was like Brooklyn,” says Goldberg. There was even an artisanal security system. Traveling the neighborhood on foot, the artists wore bells for safety. “That way, you knew whoever was coming in the alley was a friend,” says sculptor and jewelry maker Carol Newmyer.

One day, Zinoman took a walk in search of a new space for her acting school. It was an outgrowth of its spot at 14th and Rhode Island, and she had designs on opening a theater, too. At the corner of 14th and Church, “we saw a warehouse door open, and we went in,” she remembers. “It was the storage place for the hot-dog carts on the Mall.”

Like many of the historic buildings along the corridor, it was sprawling, with good bones. Zinoman homed in on the sturdy columns, spaced just right for a stage. Never mind the rats scurrying underfoot—she’d found the perfect piece of real estate for Studio Theatre.

The venue opened in 1980, showcasing contemporary acts from New York and edgy plays with social-justice themes. Washington, it turned out, was starved for a new playhouse. Zinoman’s productions drew serious theater critics, whose reviews, in turn, drew audience members from all over the city and the suburbs whose reviews, in turn, drew audience members from all over the city and the suburbs to an area many people saw as dangerous terrains incoignita. “The first year, we had 18 subscribers,” she says. “The next season, there were 270.”

Still, the neighborhood didn’t get much safer, though not for lack of trying by another class of gentrifiers—the 1970s version of an HGTV obsessive. Mostly white, both gay and straight, these house hunters saw...
Virginia flare-uppers in a close-to-downtown location and got to work patching plaster. “My wife and I had just restored a little house about the size of a postage stamp on Capitol Hill, and we got these delusions of grandeur,” says Donald Smith, then an editor at the Washington Post. “We wanted a neighborhood that was kind of up-and-coming.” They bought an empty 21-room boardinghouse on Logan Circle for $62,000 in 1974 and lived there to this day. “Basically, we’re still working on it.”

Prostitution had become 14th Street’s best-known trade. Cars with Virginia and Maryland plates would swarm the street—Johns looking for a hookup. “At the time of the World Bank’s annual meetings, you’d have the Limousines up here,” remembers Prina Hall, then active in the Logan Circle Community Association. “It was sort of tourism—seedy tourism.”

It was dangerous too. Twenty-four-year-old Pamela Mae Shipman was working the corridor in 1982 when she was forced into a red Lincoln, bludgeoned with a tire jack, and left half naked and dead in the woods off the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. Cynthia Louise Herbig, once a promising musician, was known among her fellow prostitutes as smart and cautious—the 21-year-old kept a meticulous log of her regular customers. It didn’t matter. She was stabbed to death in ’79.

Nearly every night, members of the Logan Circle Community Association hit the streets. Patrols of 15 to 20 neighbors would walk the length of the corridor from 10 PM to 2 AM. Armed with walkie-talkies, they’d physically surround the pimps and force them from their corners—a ritual that lasted years. “The pimps would throw bottles at us,” says Hall.

The neighbors tried other tactics as well. One of the more clever—a guerrilla-style bumper-sticker campaign. They printed stickers that read “DISEASE WARNING, Occupants of this vehicle have been seen in the company of street ladies along 14th Street” and covertly slapped them onto the back of pulled-over cars. That way, they figured, the men’s wives would be the first to spot them in the driveway the next morning.

For many of the minors came to the neighborhood, hoping to escape their problems. As long as they didn’t cause trouble, Kittrell says, he didn’t judge the character who came through the door. “I never judged the character who came through the door. They were poor.”

By the end of the ’80s, Washington had earned its infamous honor as the nation’s murder capital. The crack era didn’t spare 14th Street. Its boundless supply of burned-out buildings became havens for users. Open-air drug markets operated at 14th and S and 14th and T, says Vernon Gudger, who patrols the area as a Third District police officer. When druggeries began doing deals in the booths at Ben’s Chili Bowl on U Street, owner Virginia Ali invited police to stage an on-the-spot raid. “It was so successful because sugar attracted addicts.”

Further north, dealers dotted corners throughout Columbia Heights. All the while, a surge of immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua gravitated to the neighborhood. Quique Avilés, now a writer and recovered addict, lived at 14th and Irving as a teen. He was lucky enough to have family with him and remembers the corridor as lively—“You always heard the sound of footsteps down the alleys”—but also harrowing. “We wouldn’t call the police. We didn’t speak English. We were coming from dictatorships where the cops were the enemy.”

Avilés wound up addicted to crack, frequenting one of the worst pockets at Clifton Terrace, the low-income-housing complex at 14th and Clifton that was a maze of drugs, gangs, and prostitution. He learned to look people in the eye when he made deals there: “If you walked in weak, they would beat you.” (The building was run by a notoriously rapacious slumlord—the kind of owner who drove you out of the building before you got in trouble for slacking.)

One of the main hangouts for the members of 14th Street’s underworld was the New Vegas Lounge, a jazz club turned strip joint a half block from Clifton Terrace. The low-income-housing complex at 14th and Clifton that was a maze of drugs, gangs, and prostitution. He learned to look people in the eye when he made deals there: “If you walked in weak, they would beat you.” (The building was run by a notoriously rapacious slumlord—the kind of owner who drove you out of the building before you got in trouble for slacking.)

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With private developers too scared to take a risk on the neighbor-hood, Mayor Marion Barry decided 14th Street was worthy of a bold bet by the city itself. His vision: a nearly $500,000-square-foot government office building for the flattened site at 14th and U, right where the riots had begun. Importing city workers from perfectly suitable offices around downtown to what was considered a crack-infested wasteland was not a popular idea with the bureaucracy. Barry forged ahead. “He used to tell this story all the time. He said, ‘I had a cabinet meeting, and half the cabinet we’re going to take a little vote on this building,’ ” remembers Frank Smith, then the DC Council member for the area. “He said, ‘There were 12 people plus me. Twelve voted no, and I voted yes, so we built the building.’ ”

Eventually: Design flaws, mismanagement, and discord between the city and its contractors delayed construction for more than a year. But when the eight-story, $60-million Frank D. Reeves Municipal Center opened in September 1986, Barry wasn’t going to let those details dampen his moment. Before a crowd of nearly 400, the mayor spoke for a half hour about the magnitude of the center’s arrival. According to the Post, he hailed it as “an anchor” of redevelopment: “Barry recalled that some people didn’t want the center here because of all those drug addicts
FOURTEENTH STREET, THOUGH, REMAINED INTACT, and to Jim Graham it looked like a natural fit. Graham had recently become principal of Whitman-Walker Clinic, a nonprofit health center for the gay and lesbian community. In the ’80s, the organization was floundering almost entirely on a terrifying new illness ravaging Washington’s gay community: AIDS. While Whitman-Walker offered all kinds of services to help, its operations were in different buildings around Northwest. Graham wanted to centralize things.

Social-service nonprofits were moving onto the corridor, encouraged by Barry’s vision, and Graham himself admired Barry for being one of the first big-city mayors to acknowledge the AIDS crisis. But more important, the neighborhood was now full of gay residents who’d moved in to fix up houses. A clinic and to Jim Graham it looked like a natural fit. Graham had recently become principal of Whitman-Walker Clinic, a nonprofit health center for the gay and lesbian community. In the ’80s, the organization was floundering almost entirely on a terrifying new illness ravaging Washington’s gay community: AIDS. While Whitman-Walker offered all kinds of services to help, its operations were in different buildings around Northwest. Graham wanted to centralize things. The programs brought healthy men and women... — Virginia Ali, owner of Ben’s Chili Bowl, which opened in 1958 and is the only business in the neighborhood to stay open during the 1968 riots...
Comedown? Comeback or...
middle-American shopping. That Columbia Heights ended up with such economical retail is traceable to the city’s active role in its development—a direct contrast to what had been going on down the street.

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE 1968, THE INTERSECTION OF 14TH AND U was again flooded with thousands of screaming, crying young people. This crowd, though, was overcome with joy. It was Election Night 2008. Barack Obama was going to become the nation’s first African-American President.

By then, the 14th Street corridor looked nothing like it had the last time it was sphon-

dane brobbed. There were luxury lofts in old auto showrooms built by developers who’d rushed in after Whole Foods, as well as glassy apartments above coffee shops. There was a wine bar (Cork) and a gastropub as glassy as whole food’s. Barrel House Liquors is a blue-painted holdout sitting defiantly across a wall of apartments and condos—a squat, middle-American shopping.

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