

This is an excerpt from:

# ***Breakthroughs***

**RE-CREATING THE AMERICAN CITY**

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**and**  
**ROBERT GUSKIND**



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## *Lincoln's Radial Reuse: A Quiet Plains Revolution*

**F**ebruary in Lincoln, a time of year when the checkerboard of cornfields on the outskirts of Nebraska's capital city is still a somber brown and everyone is patiently waiting out the last two months of the Great Plains winter. On this particular Thursday afternoon, the mercury is pushing a non-Nebraska sixty degrees and the skies are a deep, crystal-clear prairie blue. Only the faint contrails of a high-flying plane cut the stunning azure sky.

Spring has come to Lincoln, at least temporarily. And in Clinton, a residential enclave of unpretentious, salt-of-the-earth homes north of downtown and the towering limestone shaft of the state capitol building, the premature warmth has transformed the neighborhood into a beehive of activity.

On Twenty-first Street, a quiet working-class block, carpenters are putting the finishing touches on a light-gray, two-story home. The house used to sit across town, a dilapidated eyesore marked for bulldozing, until the city arranged to have the building moved to this new site. Several blocks away, workers are carrying two-by-fours around the side of a gleaming one-story, white, wood-frame house. Before the renovation work hit the home stretch, the little house was an unkempt mess of rotting wood and peeling paint.

On Potter Street, workers are carrying building materials in and out of another home that used to be unfit for habitation. Children's toys, in pink and purple, are scattered around the brown front lawn. A newly completed bike path and park, the linchpin of Lincoln's redevelopment scheme for Clinton and two other bedraggled neighborhoods, push up against the home's backyard. On yet another corner, a gang of young boys and girls is having a time of it. They

are laughing and playing and moving dirt from a gaping hole scheduled to become the foundation of a new home.

Woodside Park, on Clinton's northern boundary, is also new. A handful of neighborhood children are enjoying themselves on the park's playground equipment, but otherwise the neighborhood is quiet. In the soft pink light of this midwinter late afternoon, the park frames a tableau of towering grain elevators, a staple of the landscape throughout the Plains.

Heartland industry and the railroads that sent their products out across America built Clinton into a bedrock working-class community in the 1800s. To the south, Clinton is still hemmed in by many of those same industries, but today they are struggling to keep Nebraska's sputtering agribusiness machine running. A little north and west, a wide corridor of rail lines heads out of town in every direction. Farther west looms the University of Nebraska and its vast campus, dominated by the football stadium that becomes the Cornhusker State's third-largest city on game days.

Ten years ago, Clinton was not a solid working-class neighborhood, it was a neighborhood teetering on an abyss. Its population fell 20 percent from 1960 to 1980, even though Lincoln as a whole was growing. About 60 percent of Clinton's residents were renters in 1980; back in 1960, 60 percent were homeowners. Many of Clinton's streets were dirt paths. They turned into muddy streams after rainfalls.

Clinton, circa 1980, had the texture of abandonment—not the kind of apocalyptic urban ruin of the South Bronx or Chicago's South Side but a more genteel Lincoln version of city rot. The neighborhood was marred by block upon block of run-down homes, empty lots overrun with weeds, and scattered, occupied old homes, many of them in advanced stages of disrepair.

However, Clinton recovered in time for the 1990s. Slowly and painstakingly, it regained the feel of a stable, working-class, middle-American community—and not by accident. The invisible hand and guiding intelligence behind the resurrection of Clinton was a city government program known officially as the Radial Reuse Project. The plan included a four-mile-long, eight-foot-wide concrete bike and walking path surrounded by soft prairie landscaping. Five neighborhood (“nodal”) parks, such as Woodside Park, were placed at key junctures along the path. The bike path, parks, and playgrounds were at the center of something much grander, though. The Radial Reuse Project, hashed out over nearly ten years of community planning and participation, became, in reality, a comprehensive revitalization scheme for Lincoln's most run-down neighborhoods.

In addition to Clinton, one of Lincoln's most venerable neigh-



borhoods, the park and trail cut through two other old neighborhoods. One of those was University Place, a more affluent and dignified neighborhood to Clinton's east that adjoins the eastern campus of the University of Nebraska. Originally an independent town, University Place was annexed by Lincoln in the 1920s. Its old city hall, on the neighborhood's main shopping street, still stands strangely as a monument to those bygone days.

Due south of Clinton is Malone, a tattered old black and working-class neighborhood hard against the university's main campus. Parts of Malone have been periodically gobbled up by the university's fits and starts of expansion. Students look to Malone for cheap housing. Slumlords have used it to build ugly little real estate empires. Change was to come to Malone, too, but at the start of the 1990s, it still displayed all of the scars of decades of decline, uncertainty, and abandonment.

With about 200,000 people, Lincoln is a lucky town. As Ne-

*The critical link in the Radial Reuse Project: a four-mile bike and walking path that connects five neighborhood parks. (Photograph courtesy of Roger Bruhn, Lincoln, Nebraska)*

braska's preeminent university town and state capital, it has been spared the wrenching boom-and-bust cycles experienced by so many cities. It has benefited, ironically, from the decline of smaller Nebraska towns, whose residents have been obliged to flee the land and farming in favor of such "big" cities as Lincoln.

Southern Lincoln is prosperous. Big suburban-style homes and ramblers fronted by perfectly manicured lawns flank tree-lined streets. Northern Lincoln—known locally as the part of town "north of O Street" or, less kindly, as "the wrong side of the tracks"—has suffered a different fate.

Radial Reuse is a story of nearly forty years of planning, politics, struggles, defeats, and victories. It began with a plan to build a highway out of downtown Lincoln through Clinton, Malone, University Place, and the northeastern suburbs with the hope that they would prosper like the neighborhoods in the southern part of town. Radial Reuse became a lesson in how those civic plans for development in the 1950s went awry and ended up leading to deterioration and decline in the 1960s and 1970s. It would become a plot with such unlikely heroes as the angry housewives who started organizing in the 1960s and ended up kindling a fire that revolutionized local politics and changed Lincoln's power structure forever. By the late 1980s, it was culminating in the carefully planned revival of the three neighborhoods that the original highway plan would have sliced into pieces.

Radial Reuse ultimately is the story of how ordinary citizens organized, later generations of political leaders battled, and city bureaucrats unceasingly worked to undo damage caused by three decades of scheming, neglect, and indecision at city hall.

### *Long Road to Ruin*

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When the long saga of Clinton, Malone, and University Place began, Harry S. Truman was finishing out his last year in the Oval Office. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard M. Nixon were on the campaign trail against Adlai Stevenson. The United States was embroiled in a war in Korea. The Berlin Wall, the Kennedy assassination, and Vietnam were still a decade away. Ronald Reagan was really just a movie actor.

The year was 1952. Envisioning potential growth on the city's north side, Lincoln's city fathers settled on what then seemed like the perfect tonic: a four-lane, divided highway to provide a fast link to the neighborhoods and developing suburbs to the north and east of downtown. This was, after all, the beginning of the era of Amer-

ica's love affair with the automobile and the dawn of the highway building boom that was to continue clear through the 1970s.

Slowly, Lincoln began buying up property in Clinton, Malone, and University Place for what was to be the Northeast Radial Highway, a counterpart to a roadway running from downtown to the southeast part of town. An acre here. An acre there. A zigzag patchwork of land in a rough line where the Northeast Radial Highway was supposed to go. By the time the city stopped acquiring property for the road in the early 1970s, it owned about seventy-five acres of land in the three neighborhoods. The homes on the city-owned land were either demolished or left to sit vacant and decaying while the highway building plans wended their way toward approval.

As plans to build the highway proceeded, the University of Nebraska, always a political giant in Lincoln, began preparing a dramatic campus expansion. Many residents expected that the university's Board of Regents wanted to link, at some point in the future, their main campus with their east campus located several miles away in University Place. The Radial Highway seemed like a perfect way to speed up the expansion and future campus merger.

What occurred, however, was quite different. The highway plans began to stall and sputter in the early 1960s, not long after they were first announced. Not everyone in Lincoln was sold on the idea that the Northeast Radial Highway was needed. The ultimate result was neither what the city nor the university had intended. Former Lincoln City Councilman Eric Youngberg, a man who came to town as a VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) volunteer and ended up leading the movement to organize the three neighborhoods to stop the Radial Highway, summarized the impact quite tersely: "The city and the university, in effect, created a slum."

What started out as a prideful municipal exercise to foster growth started showing its first civic cracks quickly. Between the time Lincoln's comprehensive plan was adopted in 1951 and a city transportation study was done in 1967, plans to build the roadway proceeded, if slowly and incrementally, but tinkering with the highway plan was already under way. Slowly, painfully, and piece by piece, stretches of the proposed highway were put on the chopping block, and when Lincoln's comprehensive plan was revised in 1977, large hunks of roadway were well on their way to being amputated. Road or no road, however, the city clung to the property it had acquired along the full length of the hoped-for highway.

Even with the fast clip of redevelopment in the early 1990s, there was still a stark, visible difference between the property within the route of the Radial Highway and the areas outside of its path. The old proposed highway corridor was like a slowly healing scar:

braska's preeminent university town and state capital, it has been spared the wrenching boom-and-bust cycles experienced by so many cities. It has benefited, ironically, from the decline of smaller Nebraska towns, whose residents have been obliged to flee the land and farming in favor of such "big" cities as Lincoln.

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Even with the fast clip of redevelopment in the early 1990s, there was still a stark, visible difference between the property within the route of the Radial Highway and the areas outside of its path. The old proposed highway corridor was like a slowly healing scar:

empty land, decayed homes, and unkempt blocks that the Radial Reuse Project was painstakingly cleaning up. Land immediately outside the corridor showed, by contrast, a semblance of normalcy: neater homes, lawns mowed, clearer evidence that property owners and residents exercised care.

The reasons for the disparities were simple. Land earmarked for the Radial Highway had been deliberately excluded from city housing rehabilitation programs and infrastructure improvements. Clinton, Malone, and University Place became neighborhoods non grata. They were cut off from such critical federal money as hundreds of thousands of dollars available locally through the Community Development Block Grant program. Even worse, many neighborhood leaders said, were the debilitating effects of twenty years of indecision and uncertainty about whether or not the roadway would ever be built. Clinton, Malone, and University Place were never Lincoln's choicest addresses. With the ever-present threat of the highway, the neighborhoods gained an even greater stigma.

Slowly but surely, the consequences started showing. Property owners did not invest in homes that might be demolished. Repairs were not made. On city-owned property, buildings rotted and weeds grew. People voted with their feet and started moving out.

Clinton, Malone, and University Place were overshadowed by that dark cloud hovering ominously in the sky, the Northeast Radial Highway. Dolores Lintel, one of the original neighborhood organizers against the highway proposal, minced no words in making the point and directing the finger of blame. Despite her normally quiet housewife's voice, her restrained anger was unmistakable as she described the fate of Clinton, the neighborhood where she bought a home in 1960: "The streets were in lousy shape and buses were being routed around us," Lintel said. "No repairs were being made on the houses the city bought and it was becoming a blighted and neglected part of town. We were angry. We felt betrayed and we felt used."

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lintel continued, "We called it benign neglect. The trees weren't being trimmed. The building codes weren't being enforced. The city had just written us off. Who wants to move into a neighborhood that's going to be destroyed, where the houses are bad and the schools aren't being upgraded?"

Diane Morgan, one of the city officials responsible for coordinating the redevelopment project, flatly admitted that by 1980: "The city was aggravating the situation with every year that passed. There were a lot of justifiably bitter feelings toward the city government."

As time went on, residents such as Lintel and Youngberg and their neighbors became angrier and angrier. In response to citizen pressure, the city shortened the Radial Highway even more in 1979, removing much of the roadway that would have sliced cavalierly through the heart of Clinton. Clinton's budding neighborhood organization presented residents with a number of options, ranging from building the highway to allowing a smaller roadway to building nothing at all. They voted to nix the roads. Lincoln complied, but only partly. It removed the Clinton segment of the highway from the city plan. On another level, the power politics of the thing called the Northeast Radial Highway continued unabated.

Yet by the early 1980s, nearly three decades after the idea first surfaced, not a spade of dirt had been turned, not an inch of pavement laid. By then, the projected cost of the shortened road had skyrocketed to \$18 million. The odds were growing dimmer with each passing day that a new highway of *any* length would ever be built. Former Lincoln Mayor Helen G. Boosalis, who presided over city hall from 1975 to 1983, concluded that the Radial Highway was "too expensive, too grandiose, unnecessary, and damaging to the neighborhoods through which the corridor had been routed."

Had the roadway been built when it was proposed, suggested Coleen J. Seng, a University Place neighborhood activist and Lincoln City Council member starting in 1987, "it would have been welcomed. In fact, it probably should have been built. But it wasn't, and by the time everybody got around to deciding to build it no one wanted it any more."

The city's 1979 move to lop off the Clinton part of the highway—at least on paper—did prove to be the beginning of the end for the Radial Highway. It was also the opening salvo in an equally long and contentious struggle to figure out how to undo damage already done.

The same year the Clinton stretch of highway vanished from the city planner's maps, the city appointed its Radial Reuse Task Force, setting in motion a planning process that would ultimately span three different mayors and five different city councils. The group was a citizens' advisory body charged with coming up with alternatives for the ribbonlike highway right-of-way the city had amassed since 1952. The city council went out of its way to direct that the group allow for maximum citizen participation in its deliberations. Notably, the task force was not ordered to debate whether the road should or should not be built. By that point, it was a foregone conclusion that the Northeast Radial Highway was nearing its death throes.

Twelve citizen members of the task force were appointed by

Mayor Boosalis and the city council to represent a spectrum of community interests. The task force included, among others, four “citizens-at-large,” three representatives from the neighborhoods the highway would have cut through, and two representatives from the business community. In 1981, another five members joined the group, including emissaries from the University of Nebraska and the Chamber of Commerce.

Gordon Scholz, the soft-spoken chairman of the department of community and regional planning at the University of Nebraska, was the Radial Reuse Task Force’s first chairman in the rough and tumble days of the late 1970s. He explained the group’s initial choice this way:

The question was whether the [highway] right-of-way was going to be a liability or an asset. As vacant land it wasn’t doing anything to stimulate confidence or investment in the neighborhoods. One option was for the city simply to sell all the land to the highest bidder and be done with it. Other people were saying “Let’s turn this into an amenity and an asset.” Fortunately that idea prevailed. The simplest thing to do would have been to sell the land and not struggle through the process of deciding what we were going to do. One can only speculate what would have happened if the land had just been sold off to the highest bidder.

One of the first things the task force did was invite a Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) from the American Institute of Architects to study the neighborhoods and the options. The R/UDAT prowled Lincoln and held meetings for four days. It concluded the highway plan should be scrapped in its entirety and that the city take immediate action to stabilize the neighborhoods. “You either sacrifice the neighborhood . . . or you choose to save it,” said one of the R/UDAT members at the end of the session. “Our recommendation is to save it.”

In 1980, after months of rancorous debate, the city council voted to deep-six the Northeast Radial Highway. Within twenty-four hours, Willard Woodside, president of the Lincoln Citizens Association (and, incidentally, the gentleman for whom Woodside Park was later named despite his prohighway sentiments), announced a petition drive to put the Radial Highway to a ballot vote.

The University of Nebraska, builders, developers, and assorted downtown business interests got behind the ballot initiative to borrow money to build the highway. Voters were asked to build the highway out to the length suggested by the 1965 transit study—the route that cut through Clinton, which the city had already removed from its plans. Neighborhood groups across the city fought back—and hard. Even though the proponents of the highway outspent

them by eight to one, voters opted to send the Northeast Radial Highway down the road to oblivion by a three-to-two margin. In December 1981, on the heels of the “no build” public vote, the city council voted to remove the entire Northeast Radial Highway from Lincoln’s comprehensive plan and from the budget as well. Nearly thirty years after the idea was first hatched, the highway was finally and definitively dead and gone.

With the highway monster finally vanquished, there began an equally tough chapter: figuring out what to do with seventy-five acres of city-owned ex-right-of-way, and how to treat three rapidly deteriorating neighborhoods. The task was firmly in the hands of the Radial Reuse Task Force. Ultimately, it came up with a deceptively simple solution—the city should mix residential and industrial redevelopment and use a linear park to separate the two land uses along the radial corridor in Clinton, Malone, and University Place. The city council ratified the plans in their entirety in 1984.

The plan, as enacted, had seven major goals:

- To stimulate private residential and business reinvestment.
- To provide needed recreation and open space.

***A deceptively simple idea: a linear park to act as a buffer between residential and industrial uses. (Photograph courtesy of Roger Bruhn, Lincoln, Nebraska)***



- To make the infrastructure improvements desperately needed in the neighborhoods.
- To open up new opportunities for existing businesses to expand and to lure new businesses.
- To provide home ownership opportunities for low- and moderate-income Lincoln families.
- To resolve the simmering and bitter land-use conflicts between the University of Nebraska and the adjacent Malone neighborhood.
- To try to rebuild a positive image for all three neighborhoods.

“The thrust of the plan was to use the city’s land to revitalize the neighborhoods and to instill confidence back in people that the city was serious about rebuilding,” said Dallas McGee, the Lincoln community development official who oversaw the redevelopment plan. The plan committed the city to building the bicycle path and parks on the land once earmarked for the highway. It also obliged the city to spend even more money buying up land that the city had missed in its first passes through the neighborhoods. Massive infrastructure improvements, including long-awaited street paving, were scheduled. The city set aside money for housing rehabilitation and committed itself to building housing on vacant lots and making redevelopment parcels available to developers. All these efforts were intended to lure private investment back into the three neighborhoods.

“Our assumption when we were developing the plan for the amenities in the corridor was that their presence would stimulate positive economic investment in the adjacent areas,” former task force chief Scholz explained. “People would begin to see these neighborhoods as desirable places to live, invest, or have a business. A positive environment pays off economically.”

The city decided to start in University Place, reasoning it was the least deteriorated of the three neighborhoods in the path of the highway. By the start of the 1990s, work in that neighborhood was complete, and renovation work in Clinton was nearly finished, too. The bicycle path and parks were also complete in both neighborhoods. Work was starting in Malone, the most run-down of all of the neighborhoods. The entire project was scheduled for completion in 1992, exactly forty years after the Northeast Radial Highway became part of the vocabulary in Lincoln.

### ***The Housewives Who Started the Fire***

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Sitting back in a chair in a city office building, Dolores Lintel, gray-haired and modestly dressed, does not look the part of a revolution-

ary. She fits the part of a loving midwestern grandmother, which she is, not Che Guevara, but Lintel, who moved to the city with her husband in 1956, turned out to be Lincoln's grandmotherly version of Che.

The first shots in the revolution of Lincoln politics were fired at Saturday morning coffee klatches organized by Lintel. It was 1964, and she and other housewives in Clinton started meeting every week to sip coffee, talk, and figure out what was happening in their neighborhood:

We didn't have any idea of what was happening or why, although residents were aware that the city government was buying real estate in their neighborhood. But we decided that we would have to take responsibility for our neighborhood and not leave it up to the city.

***Lintel Park. At neighborhood coffee klatches that she organized, Dolores Lintel fired the first shots in the revolution of Lincoln's politics. (Photograph courtesy of Roger Bruhn, Lincoln, Nebraska)***



It did not take long before the informal Saturday morning coffee sessions turned into scheduled weekly neighborhood meetings in the basement of the local school. The group followed a “start small” theory of community organizing. The first goal—a modest exercise in political muscle flexing—was convincing the city to fix up an alley next to their local school. The alley was a bumpy strip full of gaping potholes. Lintel and her allies raised a ruckus. The city filled the potholes. The alley was fixed up. The battle of the potholes won, the fledgling neighborhood activists started getting involved in zoning cases. They began fighting requests to build high-density apartment buildings in their predominantly single-family-home neighborhood.

None of this, of course, was planned in advance. As Lintel recalls:

At each meeting we’d kind of figure out what was the most pressing issue and figure out what to do about it. We just chugged along trying to manage to do something about what was happening to us. We just did what we had to do.

Coleen J. Seng lives in University Place, just a short distance away from Lintel. Seng is a mild-mannered community worker with the First United Methodist Church in Lincoln. Appearances are deceptive. Underneath, she is tough as nails. Seng got her baptism in community organizing under the aegis of the late and legendary Saul Alinsky, the Chicago-based neighborhood organizer whose confrontational tactics forever immortalized him in the community action hall of fame.

Seng speaks the language of an Alinsky descendant:

Empowerment of people is the foremost issue for neighborhoods. We spent lots and lots of time developing leadership. We had a community full of well-educated people. And we spent a lot of time getting ourselves trained about what to do in the community. That’s still the key issue for neighborhood organizations.

Seng entered the fray in the 1970s when she started working with the University Place Community Organization. From 1974 to 1976, she headed the group as it fought to stop street widenings, to get streets paved, to develop parks, to pass sewer bond issues, to organize community festivals in the hope of pulling the community together, and to run garden markets in the summer.

It was not a big leap from those modest beginnings into full-fledged community activism. It was, in Seng’s words, as simple as being “sick and tired of having things shoved down our throats.”



Lintel, Seng, and their allies first formed a community organization called Impact. Then, in 1976, they organized the Lincoln Alliance, a broad-based coalition of eighteen church and neighborhood groups. "We were coming to the realization that we had power," Lintel would recall years later, still sounding a little bit surprised. By the time the Radial Highway became a white-hot political issue, the Lincoln Alliance had become a force to be reckoned with. Lintel laughs when she recalls the shenanigans she and her cohorts would engage in to get the attention of city politicians. She smiles broadly remembering the times she invited the mayor to come to Clinton on rainy days so that the mayoral automobile would get stuck in the neighborhood's muddy roads.

The political balance of power in Lincoln was starting to change, and it was shifting dramatically. Before 1976, very few neighborhoods had a role in Lincoln's governance. Power was wielded by what neighborhood activists bitterly referred to as "the O Street Gang"—the downtown bankers, developers, and business people who virtually dictated the city's public policy agenda by private fiat. "Those were the tough years," Seng recalls. "It was extremely difficult breaking up the hold the money people had on the city."

Slowly, however, the money people started losing their total sway. As the neighborhoods consolidated around stopping the Radial Highway, political activists—led by VISTA volunteer Youngberg, who was active in Malone—began a drive to revise the makeup of the city council. Traditionally, all seven council members were elected at-large, an arrangement greatly diluting the influence of individual neighborhoods. When the activists were finished stirring up trouble, the council had four "district" representatives and only three at-large members. Youngberg was elected to the city council as the district representative from the Radial Highway neighborhoods. The outsiders suddenly found themselves inside the doors of power.

Helen G. Boosalis, a staunch supporter of citizen involvement and participation, was elected mayor in 1975. Her "basic philosophy was to have open government and citizen involvement in every possible way," former task force chieftain Scholz recalled. "That's what led to this approach of having a task force with as much citizen participation as possible. She wanted to resolve the roadway question. She wasn't in favor of it but she didn't try to squelch debate on it either. That attitude of participation in government was a milestone. She welcomed everyone's participation." (In the 1986 elections, Boosalis was the Democratic party's nominee for governor of Nebraska.)

The participatory spirit and sensitivity that Boosalis and the cit-

izen activists brought to Lincoln city government extended to the implementation of the Radial Reuse redevelopment plan itself. As the city started acquiring the remainder of the land that it needed to complete the linear park and assemble its redevelopment parcels for housing, it purposely refrained from claiming property by eminent domain. Quite the contrary. The city did backflips to meet residents' special requests for holding onto their property "just a little bit longer." One elderly widow, for instance, lived in a home that was in the way of the bicycle path, but there was an odd problem. The widow did not want to budge. Her husband had perished in an accident in a nearby grain elevator and she wanted to live out her remaining years in the house, which had a view of the grain elevator where her husband had died. The city of Lincoln obliged. It waited until she died before claiming her property for the path.

In another case, several brothers who owned a nursery wanted to finish out a few more years in business before they finally retired. Again the city complied. When the brothers decided to hang up their spikes for good, the city incorporated their property into the park system. Today the legacy of that nursery—a miniature botanical garden of flora and fauna—is a permanent part of Lincoln's new linear park.

All this made Seng a happy woman. She expressed immense thrill over the outcome of the long, drawn-out Radial Reuse fight. She said she loved her new job on the city council because it gave her, finally, the chance to influence policy from the inside. She noted the stark contrast to earlier years when "we had such polarization between decision makers and the neighborhood folks that communication just wasn't possible."

Through Radial Reuse, in fact, neighborhood participation and communitywide planning became far stronger parts of the decision-making process in Lincoln. Developers learned the practical wisdom of checking in with neighborhood leaders before going ahead with building projects.

Despite her rise to become a bona fide member of the Lincoln establishment, Seng harbored some doubts as the 1990s began. She was afraid that Lincolnites were letting down their guard in the afterglow of stopping the Radial Highway and redeveloping the damaged neighborhoods. She said there had been a precipitous decline in citizen activism, adding:

We've got to get the citizen's organizations going again. Lincoln is a terribly middle-class, white, middle-income town. We don't rally around a cause too rapidly here unless it's something right in front of our house. There's not an understanding that people still need to work together.

Lintel, who opted out of the political squabbling after the Radial Highway went down in flames in 1981, seemed content, afterward, just to be a grandmother. She freely admitted to having become “burned out” by the public warfare. Still, a wry smile—the kind of smile that bursts with the pride of having fought the good fight—crosses her face when she remembers the battles and the sweet victories she and her neighbors won:

This was a very grass-roots effort. We were just people who were ready to stand up and be counted and say “We won’t let this happen.” If we hadn’t gotten involved we’d have been just as guilty as everyone else. But the people stood up and said “No way.” The people won.

Lintel leaned back in her chair. She was silent for a moment, absorbed in thought, and then she added:

Anger is a very good motivator. It’s a very powerful thing to take that emotion and do something constructive with it.

Out of Radial Reuse, a park came to Clinton—a modest little swath of land with some trees, a gazebo squatting in the middle, and playground equipment scattered about. Everybody in the neighborhood took to calling it “Grandma’s Park,” and Lintel bursts with pride when she mentions how her little granddaughter takes special pleasure in taking her friends to play in the park. The park is officially called Lintel Park. To Dolores Lintel’s granddaughter, it really is “Grandma’s Park.”

### ***Ways, Means, and Returns***

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Radial Reuse did not come easily—or cheaply. A huge menu of city programs had to be applied to make the redevelopment project hum. With the last trees planted and the final nails hammered into new and renovated homes, Lincoln was expected to have invested \$6.4 million of public money in Clinton, Malone, and University Place. By 1990, the city calculated that more than \$17 million in private investment had flowed into the neighborhoods as well. “The park was designed to encourage redevelopment and that’s exactly what happened,” said Lincoln community development official McGee.

As part of the redevelopment process, Lincoln’s community development department offered up a host of relocation assistance programs aimed at low- and moderate-income families. Most of the assistance was developed in consultation with the neighborhood

groups that had fought the Radial Highway and then pushed for the Radial Reuse Plan in the first place.

First, an elaborate system of financial aid was put in place. It included a home purchase assistance program featuring deferred and no-interest loans and, in some cases, even loan forgiveness.

Vacant lots in the neighborhoods were marketed through the city's infill housing program, which offers eligible homeowners low-priced lots. In 1987, in fact, Lincoln started offering some parcels of land for free to families that could get financing, agree to build a home designed to be compatible with the neighborhood, and would promise to live on the lot for at least five years.

The city set up a citizen design review committee for the redevelopment area and a set of "infill" or so-called "slip-in" design guidelines. Design was a major concern because of some past developer abuse—evidenced in a number of sites in Clinton, Malone, and University Place—by old garden-style apartment complexes, called "slip-ins." Charitably stated, the slip-ins resembled rock-bottom budget army barracks. Their backsides, more often than not windowless, faced the local streets. Lincoln's new guidelines sought to assure that new housing, especially multifamily complexes, would comply with the residential character of the neighborhoods and be sensitive to existing neighborhood architecture.

The city set up yet another program to move homes slated for demolition to other plots of land where they could be renovated much less expensively than building from scratch. By 1990, some seventeen homes had made the ungainly, slow trek from their old sites to their new digs. More were scheduled to be moved, saving low- and moderate-income homes from likely dates with a bulldozer.

To the naked eye, the results of all this effort and expense are obvious, even simple. The park system itself is a modest greenway skirting Clinton and University Place. The bikeway and park serve as a "buffer" between homes and the industrial and railroad traffic to their north. Scattered throughout the trail are framed views of grain elevators, trains, and parks. The concrete path and park nodes are not fancy or flashy by any standard. They simply work. The landscaping is not extraordinary. In fact, it is the kind of work that would probably make a *New York Times* architectural critic blanch. It is all simple, relatively low-maintenance planting and grass with little or no pretense of being anything else. It is all decidedly residential and human in scale and character. It is Lincoln.

By the Lincoln city government's reckoning, development encouraged by the park system and the Reuse Plan resulted in 446 new, relocated, or rehabilitated homes, most of them for families

with modest incomes. The city could point to twenty-seven blocks of repaved streets (putting a conclusive end to the muddy street phenomenon). By 1990, fifteen businesses in the redevelopment area had expanded, adding 222 permanent jobs. Another eight new businesses had set up shop with fifty-one new jobs. Money was starting to flow back into the city coffers. From the start of the renovation work to the end of the 1980s, the value of the tax rolls increased more than 28 percent in Clinton and University Place.

### ***Malone: The Final Battleground***

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Malone, the neighborhood that adjoins the University of Nebraska's main campus and is closest to downtown, is Lincoln's reality check, its perennial problem child, and a stark reminder of what the parts of Clinton and University Place that have already been redeveloped used to look like. In Malone, early 1990, vacant land was still one of the most prominent staples of the landscape. Decrepit homes were abundant. Some sat on land that would soon be turned into a park. In short, it was the perfect picture of old-fashioned deterioration.

One large, vacant area was a redevelopment parcel where new homes were destined to go up, but many of the homes in Malone were boarded up, just the way they have been for years. On some blocks, plywood was the predominant window covering. On one street sat a little white house looking like a real estate agent's worst nightmare. A huge "No Trespassing" sign covered the door. Mattresses and trash were strewn about what used to be a front lawn.

Malone grew up in the late 1800s as a single-family residential neighborhood for doctors, university professors, businessmen, and other middle-income workers. By the turn of the century it "was socially heterogeneous, with university professors, railroad mechanics, company vice presidents and janitors living near each other," according to the *Historic and Architectural Site Survey of Malone* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, College of Architecture, 1980). "Gradually, however, the presence of white-collar workers in the neighborhood diminished due in part to the rising prestige of the residential areas opening in the southeast part of the city after World War II."

So began a long decline that could not be blamed entirely on the Northeast Radial Highway or the University of Nebraska. Malone had long represented the poorest neighborhood in Lincoln. The median income of Malone residents sank to \$7,000, compared with a citywide median of \$14,700. About 17 percent of Malone's resi-

dents were black. The neighborhood's population dropped from 3,908 to 2,724. The owner occupancy rate, meanwhile, plummeted from 40 percent to a mere 19 percent.

In the mid-1970s, a local housing survey took a look at Malone and reached a disturbing conclusion: fully 83 percent of the housing in Malone, the researchers determined, was "deteriorated." While Malone did not become a racial enclave in the strictest sense of the word, the black-white division remained vivid. Blacks and poor people were clustered in the neighborhood's particularly shabby southwestern corner. Younger, more affluent whites lived in the eastern half of the neighborhood, farthest from the downtown university campus. Many of the residents were students living in single-family homes that had been converted into apartments or in apartment buildings that replaced single-family homes.

Of all of Lincoln's troubled neighborhoods, Malone had to fight more battles simultaneously than any other. It was perennially threatened by the University of Nebraska's ambitions of physical expansion. In some ways, the plan to run the highway through the neighborhood was just one more nail in the coffin. Years later, many neighborhood residents still chafed when they remembered how

***Visible progress. In the mid-1970s, a survey concluded that 83 percent of housing in the Malone neighborhood was deteriorated. (Photograph courtesy of Roger Bruhn, Lincoln, Nebraska)***



they had once expected the university to kick all of its fraternities off campus and exile them to Malone.

To fight off the double-barreled threat of the university's voracious appetite for land and the Northeast Radial Highway, residents organized the Malone Area Citizens Council in 1976; it became the Malone Neighborhood Association in 1985. "There were so many negative influences on Malone: the university and its expansion plans, the Radial Highway plan, a crime rate that kept rising, and the devaluation of property," noted Gregory D. Newport, an architect who brought a house in Malone in 1982 and went on to become one of the leaders of the neighborhood association. Malone, Newport said, "sank into a pit of despair." He described his experience in the neighborhood as "seven years of renovating a house and a neighborhood along with personal renovation."

Malone was included in the final 1984 Radial Reuse Plan. The details of land use in the neighborhood had been worked out between the city, residents, and the university, but things changed. In 1986, the university started to rethink its expansion plans again. It wanted a bigger hunk of Malone than the Radial Reuse Plan allowed for and it declared the 1984 plan dead.

So began the final and perhaps bloodiest battle of the entire redevelopment process in Lincoln. "It was more than clear that the university wanted some Radial Reuse land for expansion and that it wasn't about to cooperate with the city in redeveloping the area for a park and residential uses," noted Topher Hansen, another of Malone's neighborhood leaders.

"The university didn't say 'Screw you,' " Hansen said with more than a trace of bitterness in his voice. "They just said 'We're moving in, like it or lump it.' But that's when the neighborhood decided to say 'Screw you' back to them. That's when we forced the power play."

The power play, as it turned out, was yet another broad-based committee, complete with tortuous negotiations that took sixteen months to wend their way to a final conclusion in 1988. It started in 1987, when the city set up the Malone Redevelopment Study Committee—made up of neighborhood, city, and university representatives—to try to smooth over the differences between the updated University Comprehensive Facilities Plan and the previously approved, but now university-rejected, Radial Reuse Plan.

The agreement finally reached in 1988 created a six-acre, L-shaped, city-owned park in Malone plus parcels of land targeted for affordable housing development. The university, meanwhile, agreed to expand in three phases, using the future Malone portion of the bike path and linear park as a firm buffer between its eastern

boundary and the neighborhood. It was the first time the university had, in effect, signed a “contract” limiting its future expansion. The city council voted unanimously to support the plan, which had also passed muster with the university Board of Regents, the Malone Neighborhood Association, the Malone Community Center, and the Northeast Radial Reuse Task Force.

“The goal was to achieve a plan through consensus,” said Diane Morgan, one of the Lincoln community development staffers involved in the process. “Ultimately, that made it a better plan and everyone took a piece of ownership.” Morgan said the city’s role in the negotiations was as a mediator between the neighborhood and the university. Once the university and Malone’s residents buried the hatchet, the city finally produced a long-awaited redevelopment plan for Malone. It was approved early in 1989. Said Hansen, a few months later:

Ultimately you get a lot more out of it by doing it the way we did than just going to war with each other. Consensus building is all good and well if you have the time and the energy to do it. But a dictatorship might be a hell of a lot easier.

With time, patience, and money running short and a desire on the part of the city to finally get the Malone redevelopment on the fast track, the city declared Malone a “blighted” neighborhood. That made it eligible for tax increment financing (TIF), a mechanism that allows Lincoln to borrow money based on future increases in property tax revenue that it expects within the TIF district. The debt will be repaid through the increased tax money.

So, on an unusually warm winter day in February 1990, we found Lincoln still going about the task of assembling the park site. It was sorting out city-owned land and trying to acquire the rest of the property it needed that was still in private hands. To an outsider, Malone still had the air of a neighborhood in serious trouble. To Lincolnites, however, the neighborhood’s potential was more apparent than it had been for a generation or longer.

There remained, though, a kernel of concern that the saga of Malone might not be quite finished. Many residents said that the power relationship between the university and Malone has been permanently altered. Privately, some residents were expressing fear that the University of Nebraska would still renege on the agreement if it decided it really wanted to expand beyond the negotiated boundaries. There was fear the university would have the bigger political clout, should push come to shove. Though against that, some argued that the negotiations received so much attention locally that the university-neighborhood agreement was nearly ironclad.



Dallas McGee, the city official who sweated out years of tough negotiations and then did the hard nuts-and-bolts work of making sure Clinton, Malone, and University Place got put back together again, had moved on to other city duties but said he was sanguine that the truce between Lincoln and its domineering university will stick.

As for the Radial Reuse Task Force, it had officially gone out of business yet still existed in an informal “monitoring” role, ready to spring back into action if one of the neighborhoods got into serious trouble.

Back in Malone, Greg Newport, the house renovating architect and neighborhood leader, said his neighborhood was still walking a very fine line:

The stigma attached to Malone goes back thirty years. You can't remove that kind of stigma just by talking. There has to be action and that action is rebuilding the neighborhood. Right now it's like a teeter-totter. Anything can send the neighborhood back into the depths of despair. It will be a few years before people say Malone is on solid ground.

Can and will Americans, in city and neighborhood, stick with the “saving” of a neighborhood as long as a bureaucracy may ignore it? It is a question on which Lincoln—sturdy prairie state capital, embodiment of the American heartland—seems to provide, at once, reassurance and everlasting question.

### ***Commentary: Lincoln***

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**ROBERT SHIBLEY:** This chapter presents Lincoln's problem as one of vanquishing the highway monster, but at its heart, the project was not about bringing powerful adversaries to their knees. It's not even about the victory of incrementalism over comprehensive planning. It's about the democratic project in its most fundamental sense. The growth of the Neighborhood Alliance, the election of Mayor Helen Boosalis, the redistricting of the city, the transformation of the town from one that had been represented by the “Men's Club” to one where you can't get on the city council without grassroots support—all this is the story of how a place takes hold of its own destiny.

Those changes happened over a twenty-year period. One of the strong vehicles was the effort at comprehensive planning for transportation. It ultimately led to neighborhood reidentification, a reassertion of power, and a coalition of neighborhoods asking “What's important here? Where are we headed?”

**MARY DECKER:** Maybe I am more cynical than most, but don't all projects claim their process was highly democratic? People tend to reinvent history. Nearly every neighborhood has one of these organizations but their impact is always debatable.

**SHIBLEY:** That's what sets this project apart. Many can claim it but few can point to it happening. There was no Neighborhood Alliance—there is now. Helen Boosalis wasn't mayor—she became mayor on a grass-roots platform that was quite unusual for Lincoln. They redistricted. They elected a neighborhood activist to the city council.

**DECKER:** Maybe our goal in communities is to maintain the creative tension that exists between insiders and outsiders, between those who vote and those who influence. Take Chicago—the so-called city of neighborhoods with aggressive adversarial forces. No matter who is mayor or county board chairman, everyone fights everyone else. There's the powerful independent, nonprofit advocacy structure, there are the grass-roots forces, and there are elected officials and the downtown business interests. This creative tension, many argue, makes the city work.

**SHIBLEY:** This goes back to the ideal of the democratic project, that we build into the system a tension between equity and liberty. Those who have power have the ultimate expression of their liberty. The forces of equity must constantly check those libertine aspirations.

Is there a clear intention to establish winners and losers or is there an intention—as you put it before—to “reinvent history”? Reinventing history is a good thing. Over and over, we must reinvent the history of neighborhood involvement, vitality, and ownership of place so people project themselves into the place and culture they live in. As designers and planners, we are in the business of producing culture. One of the ways we do that is to facilitate dialogue around those creative tensions.

One reinterpretation of history that happens all the time is when you set up a situation as win versus lose. You fight like cats and dogs, and then you rewrite the history so that everybody feels that they won. The transformation from win/lose to win/win is important. It's hard to find people in Lincoln who felt that they had lost.

**DECKER:** The truth in these processes is that there are a few crucial people who do critical things, without whom the project fails. When it's over, you never talk about that. You pretend, sitting in

that committee meeting, that everyone was equally important, but it's not the truth. If you wish to repeat the process, you have to create the fiction that everyone had a nearly equal role. It's part of the rewriting that makes it possible for new leaders to be born.

**SHIBLEY:** There happened to be many critical people in Lincoln. Each neighborhood had more than one key player who just kept pushing. It's hard to point to only one person who hung on and made it happen. That's encouraging. Maybe it is possible for many people to give a little rather than one person giving their whole life. Also, two or three key players in the planning office gave continuity to the radial plan. The unsung heroes of this story are the civil servants who chose not to be threatened by the rise of the neighborhoods, who in fact created a place for neighborhood involvement and in a very quiet but deliberate way stayed open to that input and facilitated it over two decades.

**DECKER:** One makes a choice in writing up such a story to feature empowerment or leadership, but very often the same story can be written in different ways with an equal amount of truth.

**SHIBLEY:** Well said. And the next question is: What is it about leadership that can become empowering? Lincoln wasn't making a choice between strong leadership on the one hand and empowerment on the other. The leadership that emerged understood their task to be a leadership of community empowerment.

**DECKER:** This story is, in part, a victory of incrementalism over comprehensive planning. It's time to admit that the comprehensive planning approach of some cities doesn't work. People with a planning education tend to come to problems and say, "We need to be comprehensive—anything less is second-rate." But comprehensive planning shouldn't always be a paramount value. Lincoln's approach was more strategic than comprehensive.

You said earlier that we learned in Lincoln that overall vision can still have room for rather spontaneous incremental decisions. I think that by describing it that way, you are endorsing comprehensive planning, saying that it can be improved by making room for spontaneity.

**SHIBLEY:** I don't mean to say it that way. I am interested in the dialogue between the small acts and a comprehensive vision where neither enjoys power over the other. I worry about the tyranny of a

totalizing vision but I also worry about the tyranny of always being subject to serendipity.

**DECKER:** City planning is most successful when one is free to amend and depart from the plan. Even though the vision is orderly, you must be able to say, "This doesn't work." You can't be rigid.

**SHIBLEY:** There's a very strong literature supporting that kind of thinking, but it is not for just any end that we engage in planning. There is a vision. The question is: What's the vision? We can't be relativists. We have to take a position and then be ready to negotiate.

**DECKER:** We idealize two opposing ideas in planning in the twentieth century. One is empowerment and local decision making, but in the Stowe chapter, we note that our favorite cities are Haussmann's Paris or the Ringstrasse of Vienna. Robert Moses is vilified for his process while thousands enjoy the things he built.

Speaking of Robert Moses, it may be worth adding something about transportation planning. It is the toughest kind of planning. It tends to be people versus technology, blood and sweat versus steel and rubber. The transportation planners are always the bad guys and those who fight them are always the good guys. Transportation planners often make the mistake of not allowing for their fallibility. There's an assumption that their work is precise, the product of a technical discipline, so their plans are presented as fact, independent of values and local decisions.

**SHIBLEY:** There's a quote from Moses that I like a lot but it terrifies me: "If the ends don't justify the means, then what the hell does?" This is the so-called bold, courageous planning stroke, as if it's not possible to take bold strokes in the public interest *with* the public. The choice appears to be: either we're going to have to live with the incrementalism of public involvement or we're going to be able to have a real utopian vision with a strong individual to make it happen.

I disagree. That choice says that ends and means cannot be separated. Both choices are about a community's relationship to place. The vision driving the Radial Reuse plan was to help the community put itself back in touch with a neglected notion of itself. It is neither a vision of means nor a vision of ends per se. The vision is about the relationship between means and ends.

**DECKER:** You can't separate the physical place from the human process. Physical places can be powerful motivating forces. Physical

visions become transcendent values for the community. Chicago, a town known for political infighting and building huge edifices, has always amazed me with the extent to which it holds its lakefront sacred. Unlikely and exhilarating coalitions form when the lakefront is threatened. It's a shared public vision.

**SHIBLEY:** In Lincoln, a fairly modest ribbon of highway, a bicycle path, and a few parks set in motion a series of events that reinvested Lincoln with an idealistic vision of what a city can be.