**LU 018 Script – The Uptown**

Uptown Butte. It is a place so deeply captivating and frustrating. It is elegant, dirty, and grand; burned out, played out, and promising. The potential is palpable, and the loss is tragic and wearisome. Aerial photos from the 1930s show the intense density of the business district. It was a mining metropolis in the Rocky Mountains, a proper city atop one of the richest mining districts in the world.

1917 was the peak of everything in Butte, from mining output to overall population, the number of grocery stores and the underground workforce. In Bill Burke’s *Rhymes of the Mines*, he lists over 200 bars and saloons that were open at one time in Butte. Pictures of the time show throngs of people lining both sidewalks up and down Main Street, with a commotion and cluster of people that would rival any major city back east.

Today, the Uptown is quieter. That dense mass of brick buildings is now a diminished collection of surviving structures sparsely populating about 28 city blocks, many of them vacant and made of parking lots or patches of barren land with knapweed and garbage.

And yet, of the remaining architecture, there are fine examples of early 20th century craftmanship and incredible displays of masonry mastery. It can be an enchanting experience to walk on the Uptown sidewalks for the first time. Visitors to the Uptown are often stunned at the beauty and terrifying neglect of the big buildings, a feeling I once felt myself when I first came to Butte with Montana Public Radio in 2009 for the National Folk Fest. Historian Dick Gibson says he was pulled in out of sheer fascination with Butte’s past significance. The more he learned, the more he was drawn to it.

[Dick Gibson 1]

[music]

[Dick Gibson 2]

Every city has fires, accidental or otherwise, but Butte has had more than its fair share. Dick Gibson put together a list of all the significant fires in Butte. There were 28 major fires in just the first three years of the 1970s alone, culminating with the Medical Arts building fire at Park & Main Streets, which caused $2.5M in damages, followed a few months later by the Columbia Gardens fire that Dick just mentioned. All in all, there were over 320 major fires in Butte from the 1880s to 2010, and several more fires Uptown in recent years consumed the Irish Times building, the M&M, and large buildings in the warehouse district.

Memories of the fires reside in Butte people, witnesses to the decline of their city. People like Jim Duran remember seeing the devastation of those days firsthand.

[Jim Duran 1]

Pictures of those fires Uptown show the huge crowds that would convene to watch the town burn. Jim Duran is one of hundreds who today bear witness to that legendary period of fires in Butte in the 1970s, fires that still loom large in local memory and had a permanent impact on the urban landscape. Joe Lee was a police officer during that time. We interviewed him for the Verdigris Project.

[Joe Lee 1]

[music]

This is Life Underground and I’m Clark Grant. Retired police officer Joe Lee was just talking about police corruption and the arson fires in the old days of Uptown Butte. Up next, we’ll get a longtime fireman’s take on the fires that brought down so much of the Uptown. Stay with us.

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John Paull worked for the Butte-Silver Bow Fire Department for decades. He was even Battalion Chief at one point. During his oral history recording, he told us about tons of house fires, the Superior Block fire, the fire at Jerry’s Distributing on South Arizona Street, the Whalen Tire fire, the Blue Venus fire, and several others. I asked him what effect the Uptown fires had on him personally.

[John Paull 1]  
[music]

This is Life Underground and that was lifelong Butte firefighter John Paull reflecting on the arson fires in and around Uptown Butte over the years, and whether or not the Anaconda Company might have had a hand in displacing the Uptown through arson. Of course, evidence doesn’t really exist to connect Anaconda to the fires, but the idea was well-understood that Anaconda wanted to expand the Berkeley Pit to the west, and the Uptown was in the way of that expansion. There might have been an incentive for Anaconda to facilitate the evacuation of the Uptown through a variety of means, but there’s currently no way to really prove that they were involved in the fires. However, we do know that Anaconda put direct pressure on the local government to tear down the Uptown and relocate the city center, as historian Brian Shovers explained in his talk *Myth, Community and Survival in Butte and Anaconda.*

[Brian Shovers 1]  
  
But the fight over the relocation of Butte’s core was a long and bitter battle that played out in the newspapers and in the chambers of the city council from roughly 1974-1976. It all started when Butte Forward, a community group that was largely funded by the Anaconda Company, started talking publicly about relocating the deteriorating Uptown central business district so that Anaconda, a major employer at the time, could expand their mining operations and mine out the Butte hill. Basically, it was a Meaderville blueprint for the rest of the town.

At the time, 26% of the Uptown’s taxable commercial district was vacant. Things were definitely grim, so Butte Forward turned to the federal government for a $225,000 grant to study the problem and propose solutions for relocation of the town. They hired American Cities Corporation to do the study and began making presentations to city council that framed relocation and abandonment of the Uptown as the only ‘realistic solution to Central Business District deterioration.’

Beverly Hayes, the owner of a local restaurant called Hayes House on Park Street, formed the Save the Central Business District Committee in opposition to Butte Forward, which gathered over 4000 signatures for a petition opposing the idea of relocation and pushed for a public vote on the matter.

A series of articles in the spring of 1976 in the Montana Standard detailed the two sides of the debate, with most Uptown merchants simply saying they couldn’t afford the move.

Shag Miller, president of Butte Forward, insisted at an April 1976 council meeting that people ‘think of what the future of our community is for our children and those who will come here in the future,’ which to him meant destroying the whole Uptown and letting Anaconda mine the hill out with an expanded open pit.

There was intense debate about not only the idea of relocation, but actually moreso about where to move the city center to. There were 4 sites proposed, with a spot east of the airport eventually becoming the frontrunner. In an exchange at the council meeting on April 20th, 1976, Commissioner John Haller asked Mayor Micone, “Where do you move that the Anaconda Company doesn’t have mineral rights to?’ Micone jokingly answered, “North Dakota.”

Stodden Park was the frontrunner for a while as the selected site for the relocation of the central business district, but opposition grew because it was Butte’s only park. Butte Forward offered to build a new golf course somewhere else, but that idea was eventually ruled out. Then a California developer named Kenneth Cummings tried to sell them 35 acres down by the stockyards off of Hansen Rd., an idea that was maligned in the newspaper by someone saying, “We have Walkerville and Centerville…now we’ll have manureville!”

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Ultimately, the plan would have allowed the city to somehow sell the Uptown to the Anaconda Company, after which the Company could, under eminent domain rights, condemn the land and evict tenants. Then, when a new city center was built downtown with parking for everyone, Anaconda could ‘mine the old area, whenever it wants to, without bothering anyone.’

On July 21st, 1976, the council decided, after some parliamentary maneuvering on the part of Commissioner Ray Driscoll, to finally put an end to the relocation idea by voting that the city no longer pursue federal funding related to the relocation. Commissioners voting for continued efforts to tear down the Uptown and move the city center were: Charles Abraham, Chris Carroll, Rick Griffith, and Dan Rosa. Those voting against were: Bob Schulte, Bill Robinson, John Haller, Ray Driscoll, Bob Lee, John Franey, Claude Pettibone, Terry Kelly, and Phil Paull. After that vote, Butte Forward and their plans for the city were pretty much dead.

Gene Tidball was the Vice President of Public Affairs at the Anaconda Company at the time of this vote, and here he reflects on how the city council slipped out of the hands of Butte Forward leader Jim Murphy.

[Gene Tidball 1]

Mayor Micone hurried off to Washington DC the week after the vote with Butte Forward execs Jim Murphy and Shag Miller to try and convince a five-man federal commission that their relocation idea could somehow still work. It didn’t work out, and federal support for an unwanted city relocation was out of the question. Their American Cities Corporation study, costing almost a quarter million dollars, was all for naught. Senator Mike Mansfield, who was retiring from the US Senate just a few months down the road, wasn’t offering any support for a project that the city council had voted down. Butte Forward was over, and the Uptown was spared.

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Writing a guest editorial in the Montana Standard in September of 1976, A.C. Howard said, “If Butte Forward would have listened in at corner bars and the homey party line discussion, instead of visualizing only the echo of their own dreaming in country club gatherings, they could have saved much money.’

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So, after this dramatic episode in 1976, which bitterly divided the community for the better part of two years, a new effort surfaced that tried to secure federal dollars to revitalize and rehabilitate the Uptown, instead of tearing it all down. Beverly Hayes, who had led the Save the Central Business District Committee, now headed up the Restore the Central Business District Committee, a 25-person body tasked with identifying and trying to solve numerous development issues Uptown, from parking to insuring buildings to establishing an Uptown walking mall with cobblestone paths, trees, and benches. As she put it in a newspaper article a couple months after the Butte Forward idea was voted down, “If there is money to tear it down, why isn’t there money to build it back up?”

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Just 5 months after the discussion to tear down the Uptown reached its climax, federal funds did become available through HUD and the Small Business Administration to allow up to $500,000 per business owner in low-interest loans and grants. All the doom and gloom about how the Uptown would just deteriorate indefinitely turned out to be largely untrue, as creative redevelopment efforts began to take shape. This was also the beginning of tax-increment districts forming in the Uptown area, which eventually led to the creation of the Urban Revitalization Agency, an entity of the newly consolidated city-county government that was first led by Janet Cornish.

[Janet Cornish 1]

[Janet Cornish 2]

[Janet Cornish 3]

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[Janet Cornish 4]  
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That’s Janet Cornish, the first director of the Butte Urban Revitalization Agency, a government entity that joined in the fight against deterioration of the Uptown central business district. She ran the agency from 1979-1987 and has owned and operated her own community development consulting firm ever since.

[music]

This is Life Underground, and I hope you’ve learned something in our examination of the Uptown on today’s episode; I know I have. Of course, the struggle is not over, and even today, as we look back on almost 50 years since Butte Forward was rejected and the community firmly decided to try and take on redevelopment of the Uptown, there is still a staggering amount of vacancy Uptown. Broken glass and boarded up windows characterize my walks around the Uptown, and it seems like large scale demolitions are becoming *more* common, despite a spike in real estate values and interest from outside equity in the historic district.

Most recently, a group put together a Master Plan for Uptown Butte, which details all the pedestrian infrastructure and other improvements they’d like to see. As I read through it, I wondered how many times this very sort of thing had been discussed, designed, printed and distributed, only to be filed away on a shelf somewhere while the historic buildings continue to fall down, burn down, or be torn down.

In fact, there was an Uptown Master plan all the way back in 1960. The Butte RUDAT of 1972 proposed a complete redesign of public transportation and a twin hilltop city on Timber Butte. There was the Butte Central Business District Plan of 1973 and the Central Business District Development Program of 1976. Then the Urban Renewal Plan of 1980, the Uptown Parking Study of 1983, the Butte Uptown Plan of 1984, the Butte Community Union’s Preservation plan of 1985, the Butte-Silver Bow Master Plan of 1987, the Report to the President and Congress in 1990 by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Historic Preservation Economic Development Subcommittee Report on the Butte Hill of 1991, The Regional Historic Preservation Plan, or RHPP, from 1993, and the Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan of 2013. That’s leaving out all the Study Commissions on the Local Government from each decade, along with numerous other studies on everything from environmental health to pigeons.

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With so much information on the lasting conundrum that is Uptown Butte, there’s one thing missing from the majority of these plans: implementation. Maybe in time we can simply fix the buildings, and from there realize the goals of so many past efforts to revitalize the Uptown.

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I’m Clark Grant. Thanks for listening to Life Underground.

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