COLUMN

Black Lives Matter. Do buildings? | Inga Saffron

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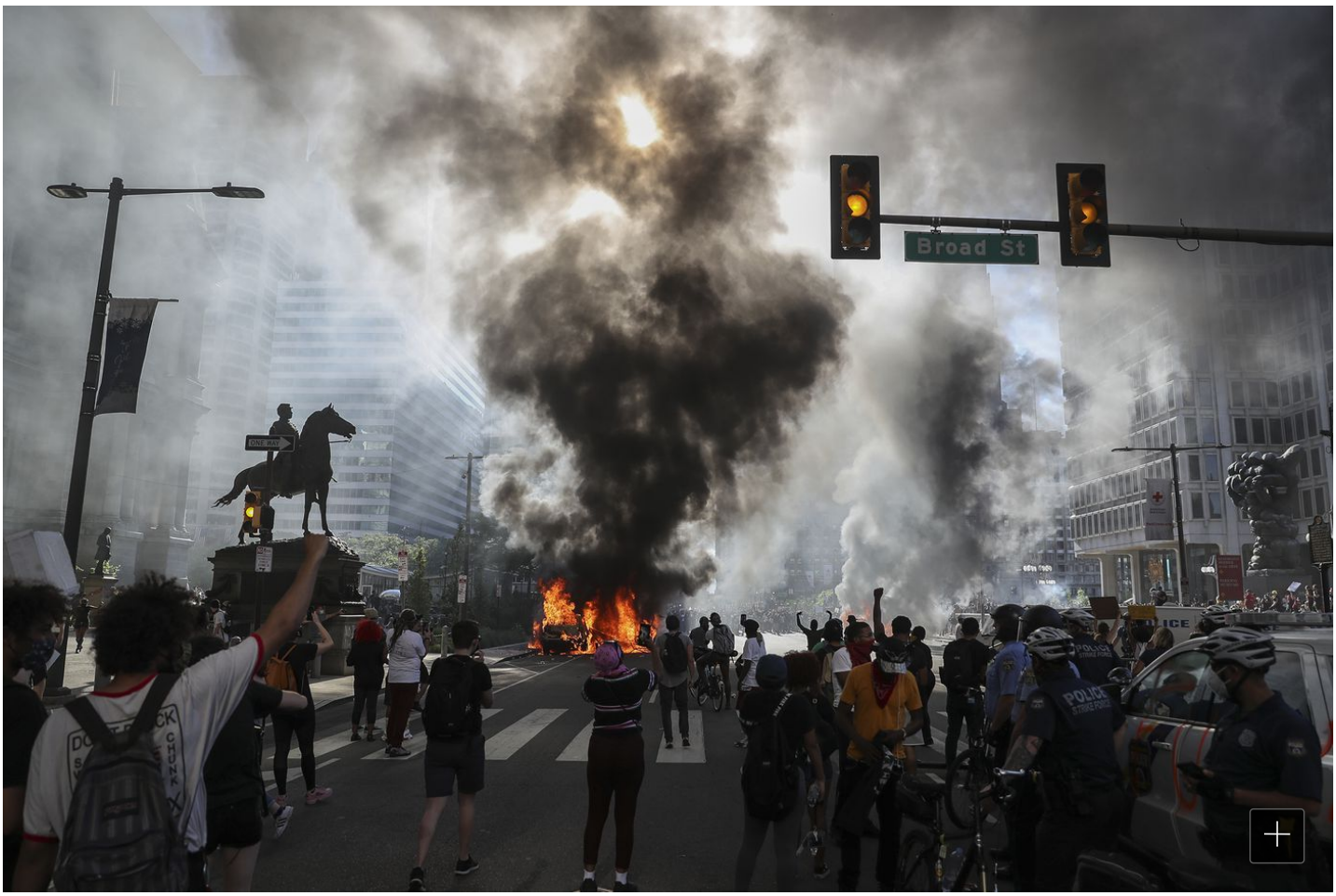

HEATHER KHALIFA / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Does the destruction of buildings matter when black Americans are being brazenly murdered in cold blood by police and vigilantes?

That's the question that has been raging on the streets of Philadelphia, and across my architecture-centric social media feeds, over the last two days as a dark cloud of smoke spiraled up from Center City. What started as a poignant and peaceful protest in Dilworth Park on Saturday morning ended up in a frenzy of destruction by evening. Hardly any building on Walnut and Chestnut Streets was left unscathed, and two mid-19th century structures just east of Rittenhouse Square were gutted by fire.

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Their chances of survival are slim, which means there could soon be a gaping hole in the heart of Philadelphia, in one of its most iconic and historic neighborhoods. And protesters moved on to West Philadelphia's fragile 52nd Street shopping corridor, an important center of black life, where yet more property has been battered.

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The anger is fully justified. Black people have been the victims of systemic oppression in America for 400 years, but video footage and social media have now made it impossible to deny how bad things really are. The grotesque killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor — and many others before them — are attacks on the fundamental promise of our democracy. To the protesters who smashed the elegant shop windows of Walnut Street's fanciest stores, the destruction was a just and justified response.

JESSICA GRIFFIN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Fires set during the weekend's protest in reaction to the police killing of George Floyd seriously damaged two historic, mid-19th Century buildings on Walnut Street in Philadelphia.

People's lives are more important than property, the argument goes, and these protests would never have gained America's undivided attention if they had stuck to the usual polite round of *hey-hey* chants. I heard exactly this from my social media followers, from architects and preservationists I admire, from Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones — even from my 27-year-old daughter, a child of Center City.

"We owe this long-overdue moment of upheaval to the unprivileged, impoverished, and underrepresented. Property damage can always be recovered. Human lives lost cannot," Michael Bixler wrote in a Facebook post. Bixler is managing editor of the Hidden City website, one of the city's most ardent advocates for preserving buildings and keeping them from being destroyed by fast-buck developers.

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"People over property" is great as a rhetorical slogan. But as a practical matter, the destruction of downtown buildings in Philadelphia — and in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and a dozen other American cities — is devastating for the future of cities. We know from the civil rights uprisings of the 1960s that the damage will ultimately end up hurting the very people the protests are meant to uplift. Just look at the black neighborhoods surrounding Ridge Avenue in Sharswood or along the western end of Cecil B. Moore Avenue. An incredible 56 years have passed since the Columbia Avenue riots swept through North Philadelphia, and yet those former shopping streets are graveyards of abandoned buildings. Residents still can't get a supermarket to take a chance on their neighborhood.

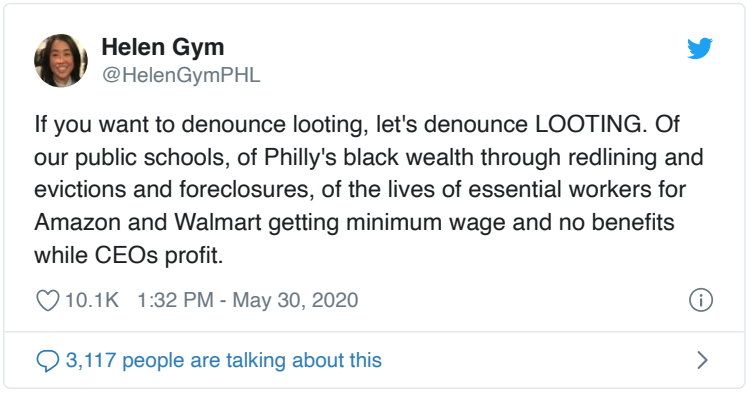
ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
The intersection of Ridge Avenue and Sharswood Street shows the blight that has plagued the area since the 1964 Columbia Avenue riots. The building has since been demolished..

A. Bruce Crawley, an African American businessman, was 18 when those riots broke out, but he remembers them like they were yesterday. He was sitting on the steps of the public housing project where he lived when he saw “a huge black cloud of smoke pass overhead.” He desperately wanted to join the protests, but got there as they were ending.

As much as he supported the cause, it was painful to watch shop owners shut their business and never come back. Eventually Temple University rebuilt Columbia Avenue, renamed for Cecil B. Moore, Philadelphia’s great civil rights leader. “But it’s no longer a place where a neighborhood could grow organically,“ he said. The destruction opened the way to gentrification, something much feared on 52nd Street.

ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Transit police make their way along Chestnut St. as looters took to the streets of Center City Philadelphia during a protest against the death of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Photograph from Saturday, May 30, 2020.

Of course, the uprising sweeping the country right now is not your grandparents' civil rights protest. It's no accident that today's protesters began by targeting the high-end shopping streets of Center City and Philadelphia's marble-clad City Hall, and not the black and brown neighborhoods overlooked by the city's boom. Center City is seen as a bastion of wealth and privilege. The protesters weren't just attacking buildings and looting clothing and sneakers; they were smashing the symbols of global capitalism. The graffiti scrawled on the elegant Rittenhouse Square home of financier Joel Freedman, who is likely to reap a windfall from closing Hahnemann University Hospital, was the first salvo.



Although a half-century apart, today's uprising and the civil rights movement can both be seen as a response to rising inequality. The protests of the '60s were preceded by two decades of deindustrialization and declining wages in the black community, says New York University professor Thomas J. Sugrue, who wrote a groundbreaking history of the period, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis.* The wage gulf has only widened since the 2008 recession. That partly explains why today's protests are a multiracial alliance of people who feel bound together by a common enemy. "We're seeing a synergy between folks protesting police violence and those challenging the injustices of the international economy," Sugrue told me.

As stand-ins for global power, though, the two fire-damaged buildings on Walnut Street are poor representatives. While they currently house two global brands, Vans and Doc Martens — ironically, the shoes of the working class — both buildings are locally owned. And that small real estate company is part of a dwindling number of mom-and-pop businesses in the city.

Some protesters have cavalierly dismissed the consequences of the looting by saying that insurance will cover the costs of repairing the damage. That view assumes that the owners are fully insured, and that they have both the desire and the ability to restart their businesses. Neither are givens. Philadelphia's downtown retail district was already fighting to hold its own against online shopping before the pandemic hit. If those two Walnut Street buildings come down, you can bet the site will end up in the hands of an out-of-town investor, making the rampage a victory for global capitalism.

Few of the protesters are likely to recall the burned-out buildings that sat empty for a decade across from City Hall during the '90s. They, too, were waiting for an insurance payout. The city may feel like one big, money-driven construction site, but its revival is a mere 20 years old, and modest by the standards of other boomtowns. It could easily slip back into decline. When businesses close, they don't pay the taxes that the city needs for important programs like Rebuild and pre-K, and to keep SEPTA alive during the difficult years ahead.

Center City may indeed be an island of privilege in a very segregated place, but like all downtowns, it also serves as common ground for the whole city, where rich and poor, black and white, come together. "On a good day, it can be seen as a canopy that is open to all kinds of people," said sociologist Elijah Anderson, who coined the term in his book *The Cosmopolitan Canopy.* Center City belongs to all of us. "The rioting is a tremendous rip in the canopy," he told me.

You can be appalled and heartbroken by our country's deadly racism, and yet still quake at what the damage to downtown portends for Philadelphia. Racism is built on strong foundations. The momentary satisfaction of destroying a few buildings does nothing to remove those structures. All it does is weaken our city.

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COVERAGE BEGINS ON PAGE 3

DETAINED JOURNALIST SHARES HER STORY PAGE 14

BIDEN IN PHILLY: 'I'LL SEEK TO HEAL' PAGE 10

VOTERS KEEP THEIR DISTANCE AT THE POLLS PAGE 11