

# Newark Changing: Mapping Neighborhood Demolition, 1950s to Today

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## Introduction:

*Newark Changing* is a first-of-its-kind visual encyclopedia of 2,400 photo comparisons of almost every street corner, home, and building demolished by urban renewal and the social forces behind urban decay. Through an interactive and text-searchable historic map, any visitor can travel in time to explore their street and their building as it appeared in the period 1959-68 vs. today. Thousands of old street photos are brought to life with contemporary 360-degree panoramic photos of the same street scenes today, taken from identical camera angles to the old photos. This is the most extensive collection of photo comparisons past and present ever assembled for any American city.

Through photos and maps, this digital exhibit documents the impacts of urban renewal, white flight, and abandonment on Newark neighborhoods. From 1959 to 1968, doctor turned amateur photographer Samuel Berg MD documented Newark's built environment in 2,400 photos. Over weekend walks over several years, he meticulously captured almost every building in the city's urban core. Specifically, he walked in the neighborhoods that were about to be demolished. Berg's camera captured the last known images for hundreds of historic buildings, in the weeks – sometimes even hours – before their untimely demolition.

Berg's images show street scenes, old houses, small businesses, factories, churches, schools, and public spaces. His photos do not capture major monuments, mansions, or important buildings. His photos instead capture the "everyday urbanism" and "social infrastructure" of corner stores, bodegas, tenements, rowhouses, and the historical architectural fabric of working-class neighborhoods. His photos are a unique document of Newark's rich and varied built environment before demolition. This represents the largest collection of common day street photos ever assembled for an American city.

Demolition continues today of the precious little architectural and historic fabric that survives of lost Newark. Among all major cities and towns in New Jersey, Newark has witnessed the most demolitions of historic structures. Among any major city along the northeast corridor, Newark today has some of the weakest protections for landmarked structures.

## Historical Context:

*Newark Changing* reveals the scale and devastation of urban renewal, not from the aerial perspective of the city planner's map but from the human perspective of the street corner and neighborhood.

Tens of thousands of individual streets, homes, apartments, churches, and Jewish, black, and Italian-owned businesses in Newark were "redlined" in the 1930s and deprived of investment. Most of these neighborhoods today have been bulldozed for interstate highways, universities, hospitals, and corporate investments in real estate.

Newark undertook more urban renewal spending per capita than any of the nation's thirty major cities. Billions in taxpayer money (adjusted for today's value with inflation) was spent from 1945 to 1967 to demolish at least 10,000 buildings, displacing 50,000 people, 65-77% of whom were black. Neighborhood clearance for interstate highways, and the campuses of Rutgers University, the Newark College of Engineering, and the University of Medicine and Dentistry stirred up community resistance and anger.

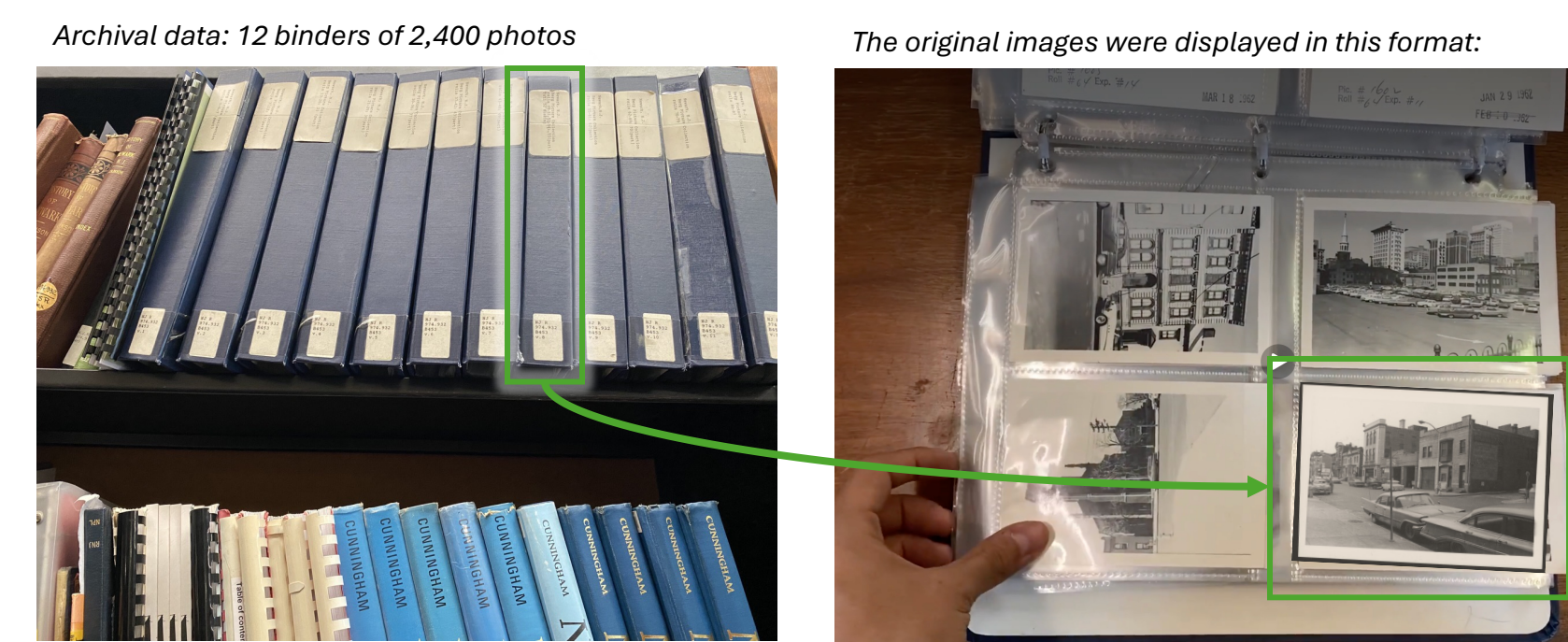
At the same time, the migration of people and jobs away from urban centers deprived cities like Newark of the industrial employment base they once had. Long-term patterns of white flight, urban decay, and under investment accelerated after the 1967 racial unrest. From 1960 to 1990, 130,000 fled Newark, leaving abandoned neighborhoods behind them. Urban renewal started displacement, but white flight and urban decay continued it. In addition, blacks from displaced "slum" clearance projects moved into neighboring white neighborhoods like Vailsburg, Weequahic, and Irvington, in turn causing white flight from those communities. The extent of neighborhood demolition expanded from urban renewal areas into surrounding neighborhoods, rich with hundreds of historic structures but no communities left to preserve them. Newark still struggles to confront and overcome decades of harm inflicted on the city by de-industrialization and population loss to the suburbs.

## Methods and Questions:

In 2018, the Newark Public Library digitized Samuel Berg's 2,400 photos for the first time. In 2022, I took these scanned photos and then organized, geotagged, and uploaded them online in a digital format. The original photos included few captions. For architectural historians, preservationists, and members of the public viewing this collection, there was no way to infer from the historical photos alone: Which buildings survived? How had the neighborhood changed? How can we remember, visit, or study the locations shown in all 2,400 of these photos if we do not know where they were taken, and what these locations look like today?

This project intervenes in this problematic and incomplete archival record by using the tools of the digital humanities: interactive mapping, website design, Google street view, georeferencing historical maps above contemporary topographies, as well as automated batch processing and geotagging of historical images.

All 2,400 comparisons of past vs. present street scenes can be browsed by interactive map, by neighborhood, by subject, by street, or by the public institution responsible for demolition. Visitors can thus travel in time to explore today's empty fields, parking lots, and desolate streetscapes for the vibrant neighborhoods they were before the automobile age.



## Community Impact:

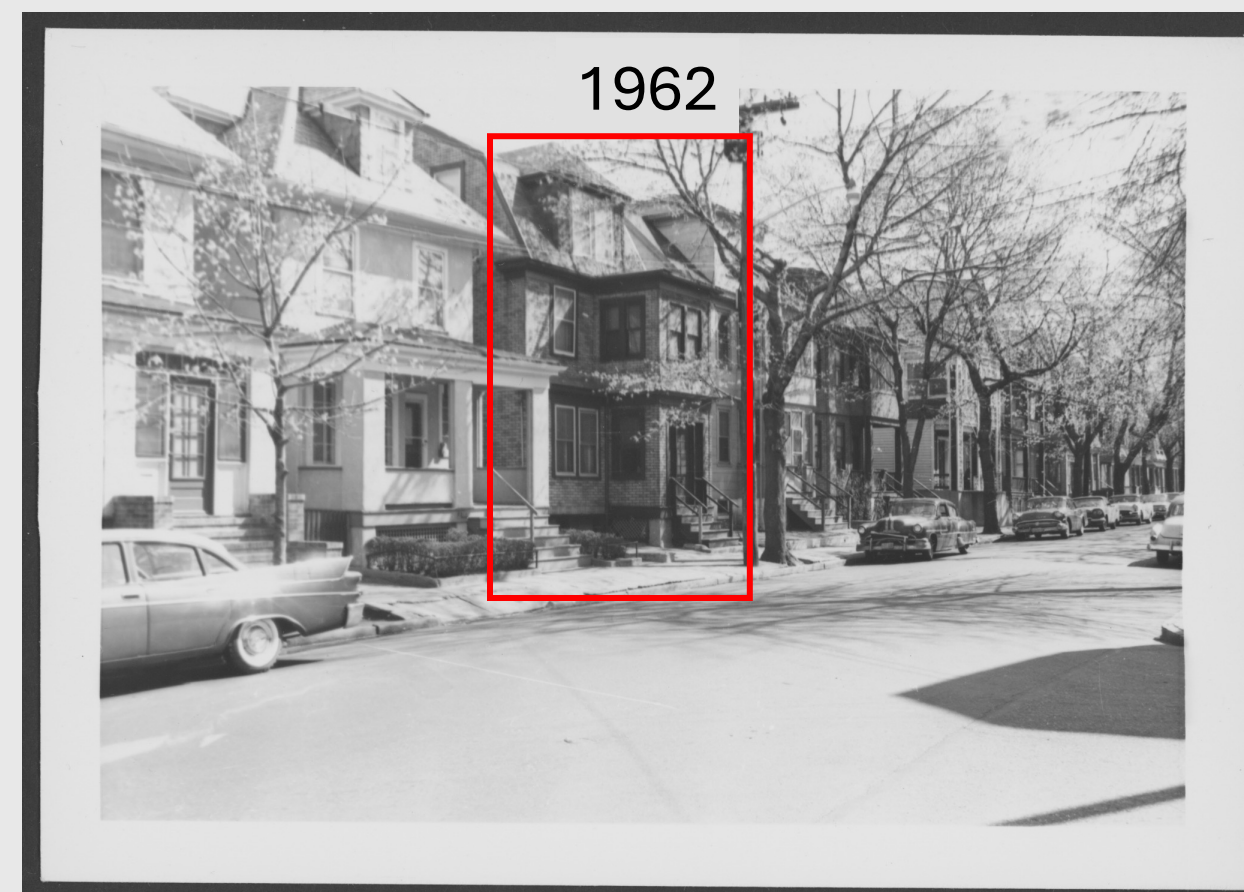
Historians and visitors to the Newark Public Library actively use this website to support their research. The interactive maps are circulated among neighborhood groups and senior citizens who are studying their family histories, childhoods, and memories.

Community members contributed annotations and memories to about one hundred of these photos. A few of these annotated images are featured here. The rest are embedded as a special layer on the map:

From a survey of the 50,000+ people who visited this site:

- 95% are from the U.S. / 5% are international.
- 25% of U.S. visitors are from Newark / 60% from NJ

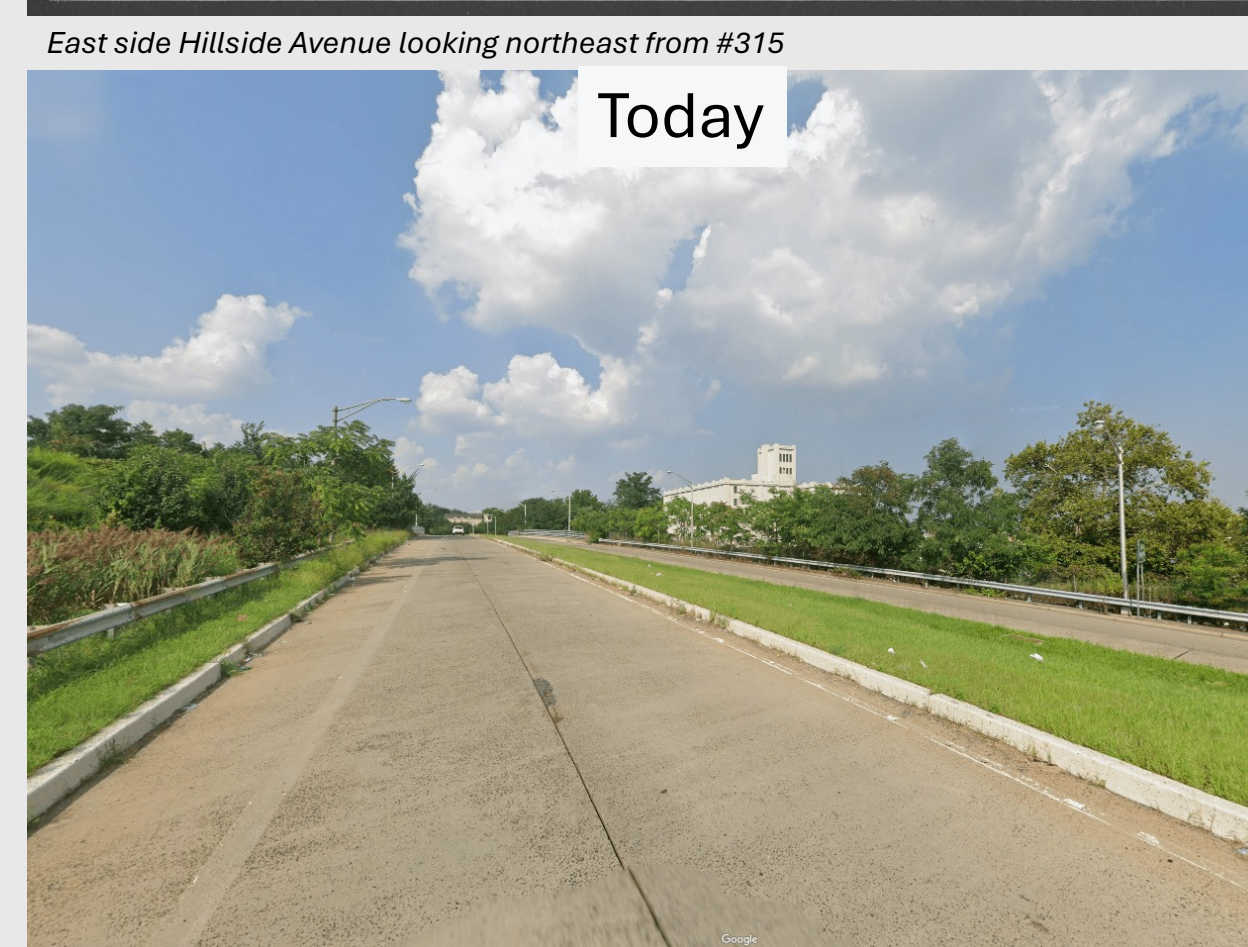
Contribute your memory to this project...!



^ Jane Davis describes her childhood:

"The beautiful Weequahic section I lived in was murdered by politicians and the real estate industry as their answer to the black migration. (My parents came to Newark from Georgia in the late 1940s.) My family's home — 141 Watson Ave. — was the last house torn down on that street to make way for the highway. Such a travesty. [...] It's amazing how the Newark that was — and thus how/why it was dismantled — nowadays is unknown to... most people. And blacks often get blamed for driving the city into the ground—for the historically ignorant, the myth/slander/libel of 'there goes the neighborhood' really took hold. In any case, Newark still means so much to me and is most certainly my 'home.'"

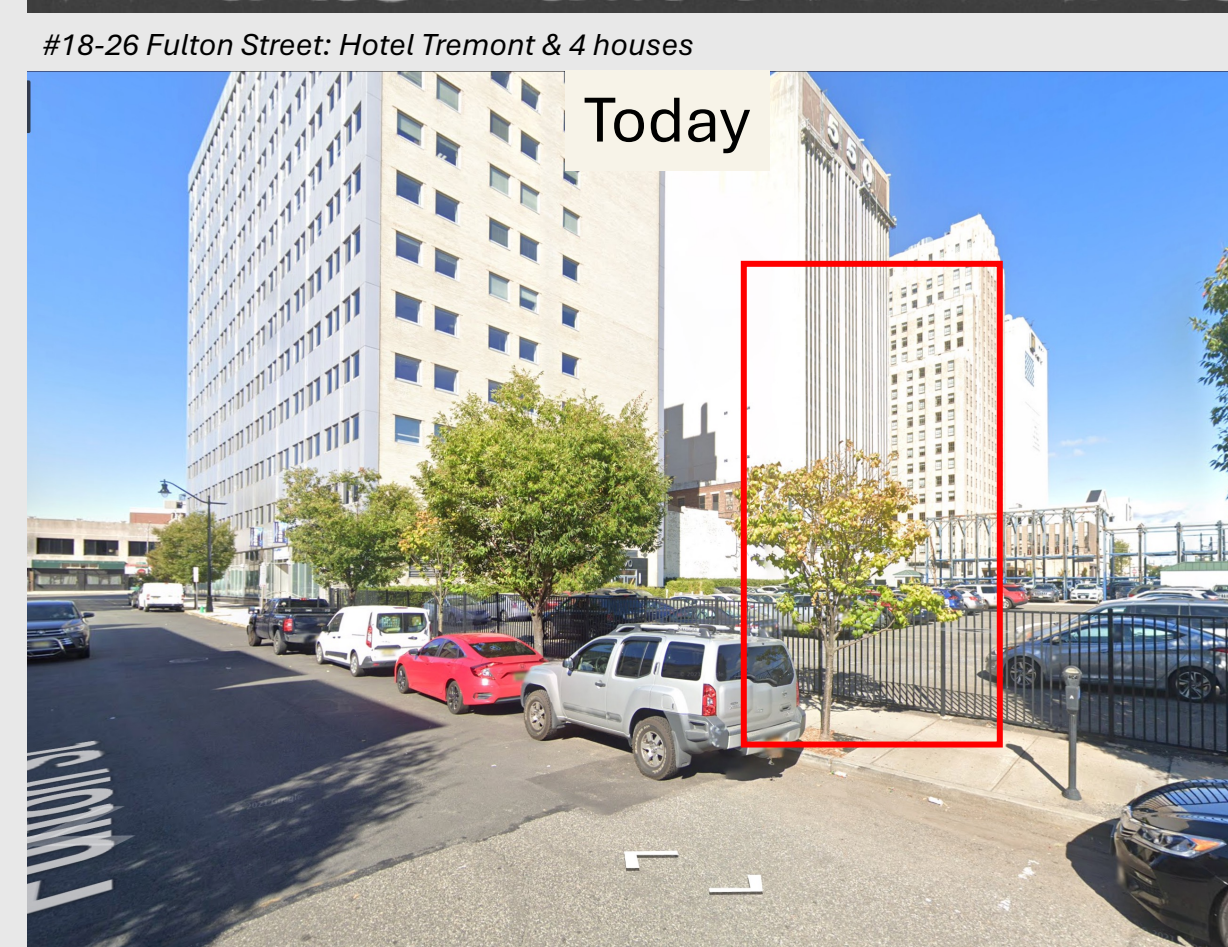
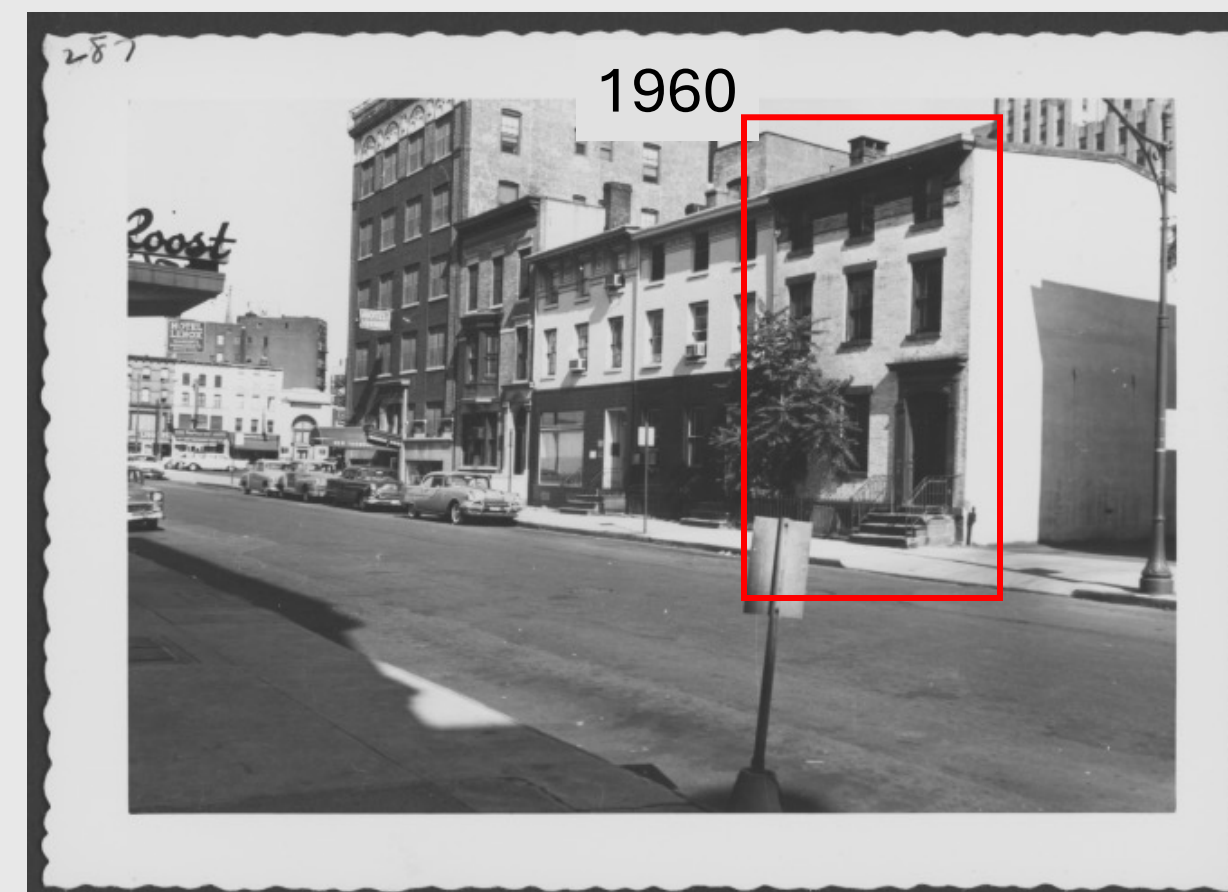
"In any case, I just wanted to say that the part of the website that has 'before and after' photos showing what had been in contrast to the emptiness of the highway is SO amazingly meaningful and essential — at last, I can SEE the houses, stores, etc., that made up my home but that have been erased for decades now. So, though there is much more to say about Newark, I just want to say a huge thank you from the bottom of my heart."



^ Veronica Battle remembers her neighborhood:

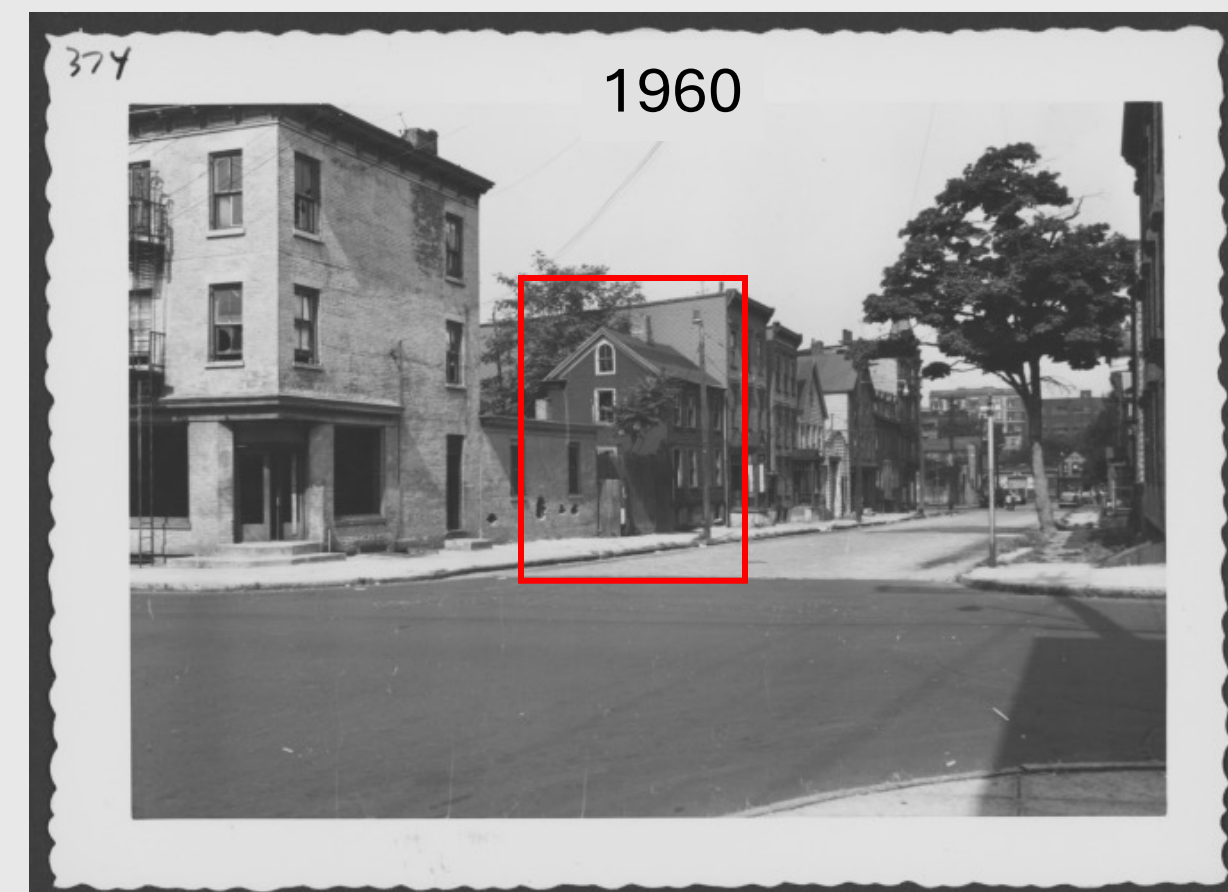
"Thank you for the old pictures from Newark Changing 1950s to today. I grew up in Newark. Mainly in the Clinton Hill & Weequahic Sections. I remember when they were demolishing some parts of these areas. Did you take any photos of the areas of Wainwright, Leslie, Hobson, Dewey, Bragraw, Schley Fabyan and surrounding streets?"

These streets, homes and people were displaced because of I-78. They didn't completely finish I-78 until the early 1980s."



^ June Williamson describes her grandfather's home:

"My grandfather landed in Newark (from Scranton) as a young man in the depths of the Depression. In the 1930 Census, his address is 26 Fulton Street #16 (lodge of Katherine Graves), which is now, of course, a parking lot! He worked as a coil winder for Western Electric."

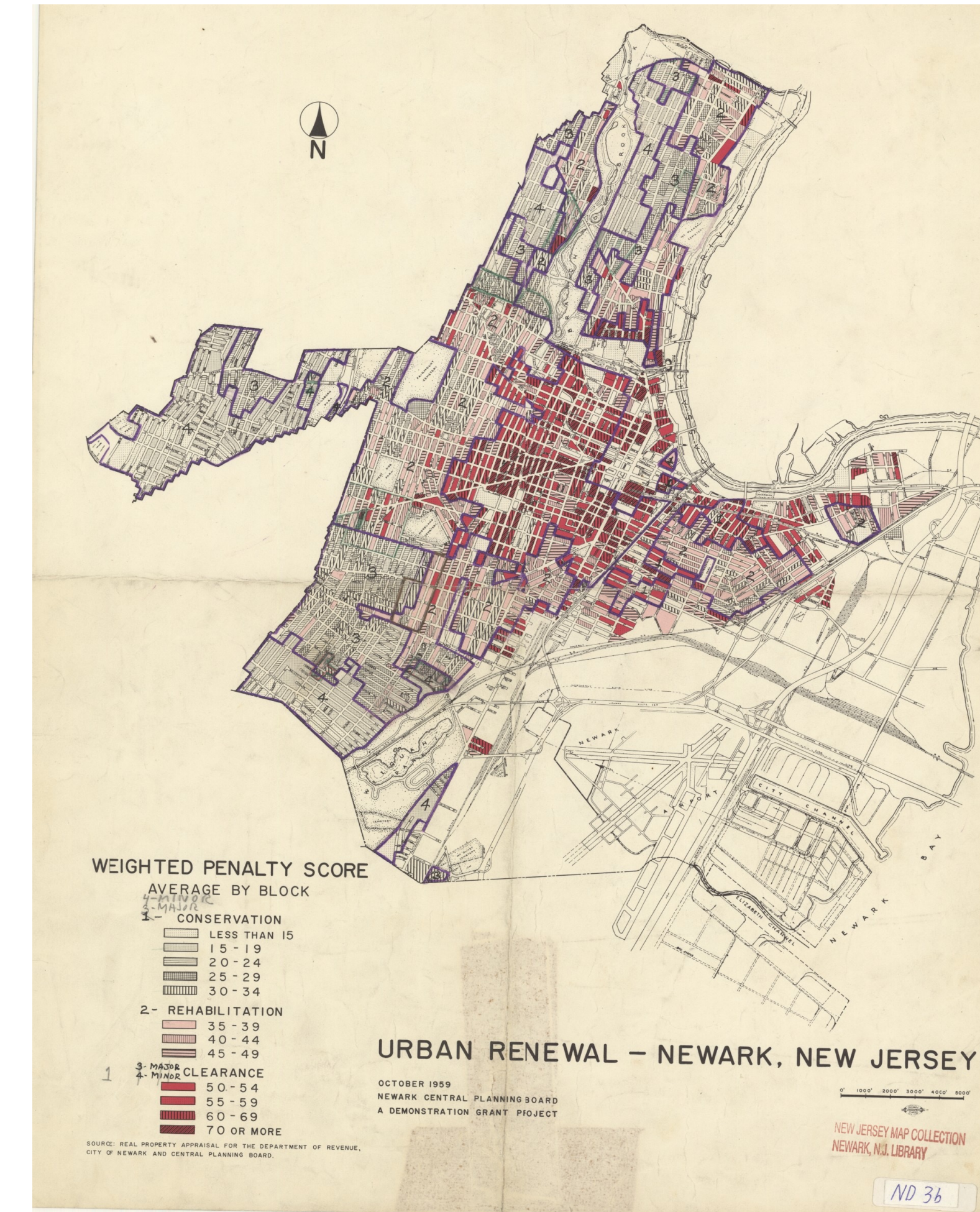


^ Anthony Vanacore reflects on his girlfriend's family:

"My girlfriend's great great grandfather Edward F Ganning moved to 100 West Street with his family from the 1890s to 1920s when he died. He raised his youngest son there, and his other kids also resided there in their young adulthood. This is the first photo I've seen of the area as it is now redeveloped."

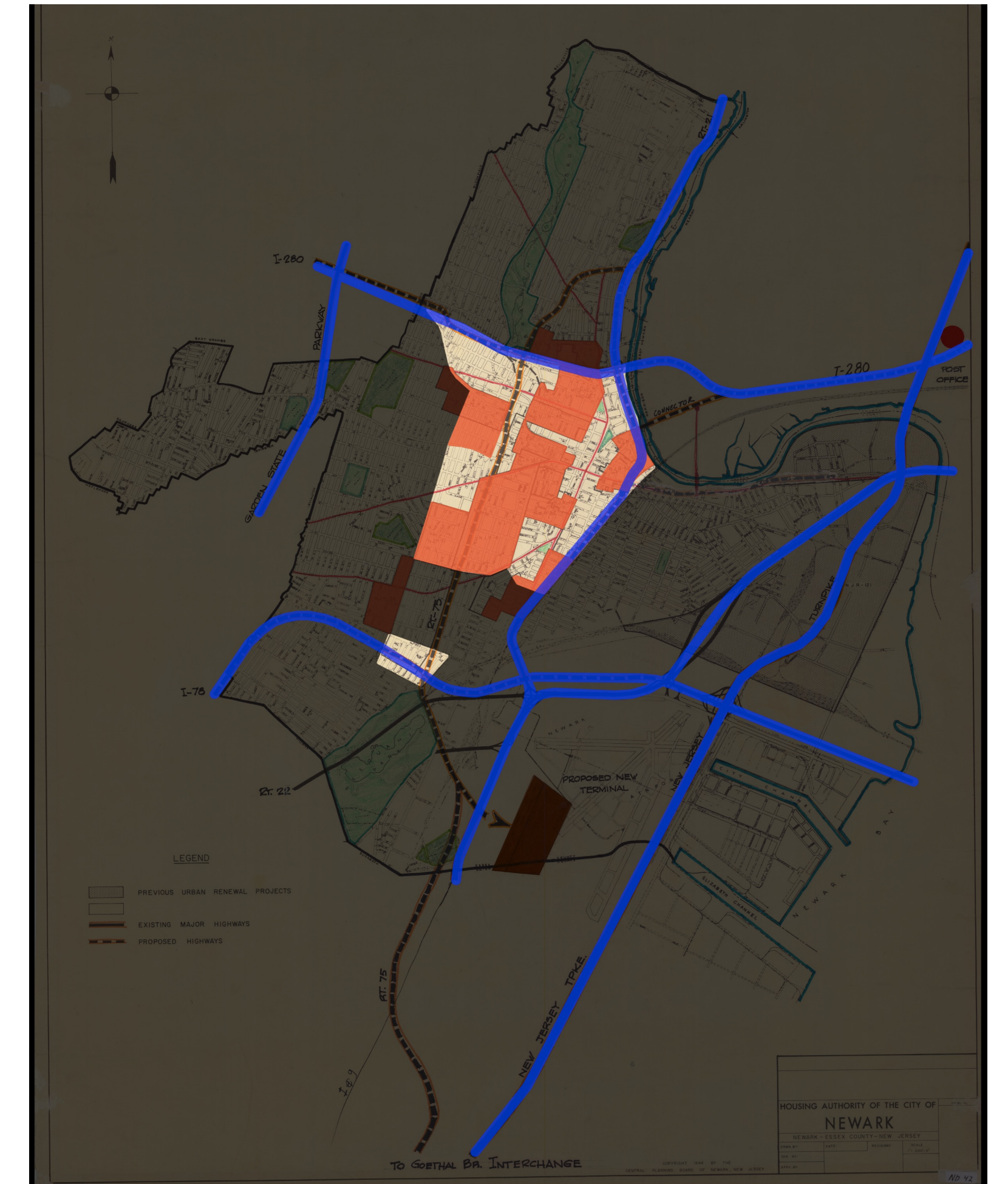
# 2,400 geolocated images of past vs. present:

Black neighborhoods declared as "blighted":



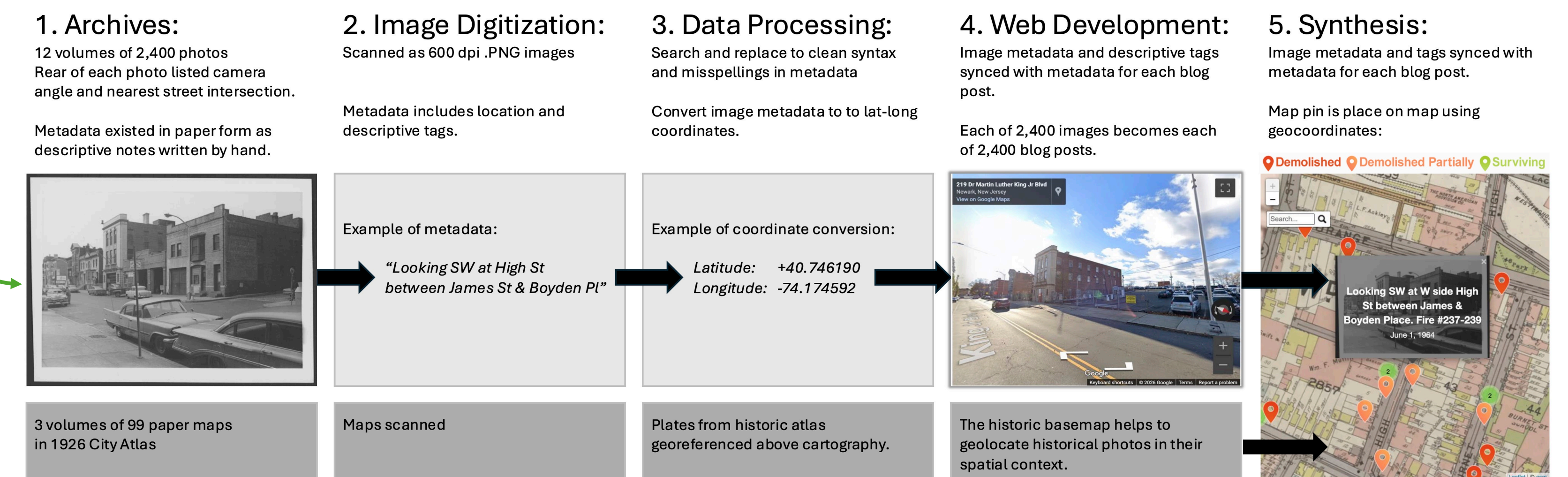
1959 "blight map" shows the historic neighborhoods of Newark declared as slums and slated for demolition.

Area of study documented in photo comparisons:



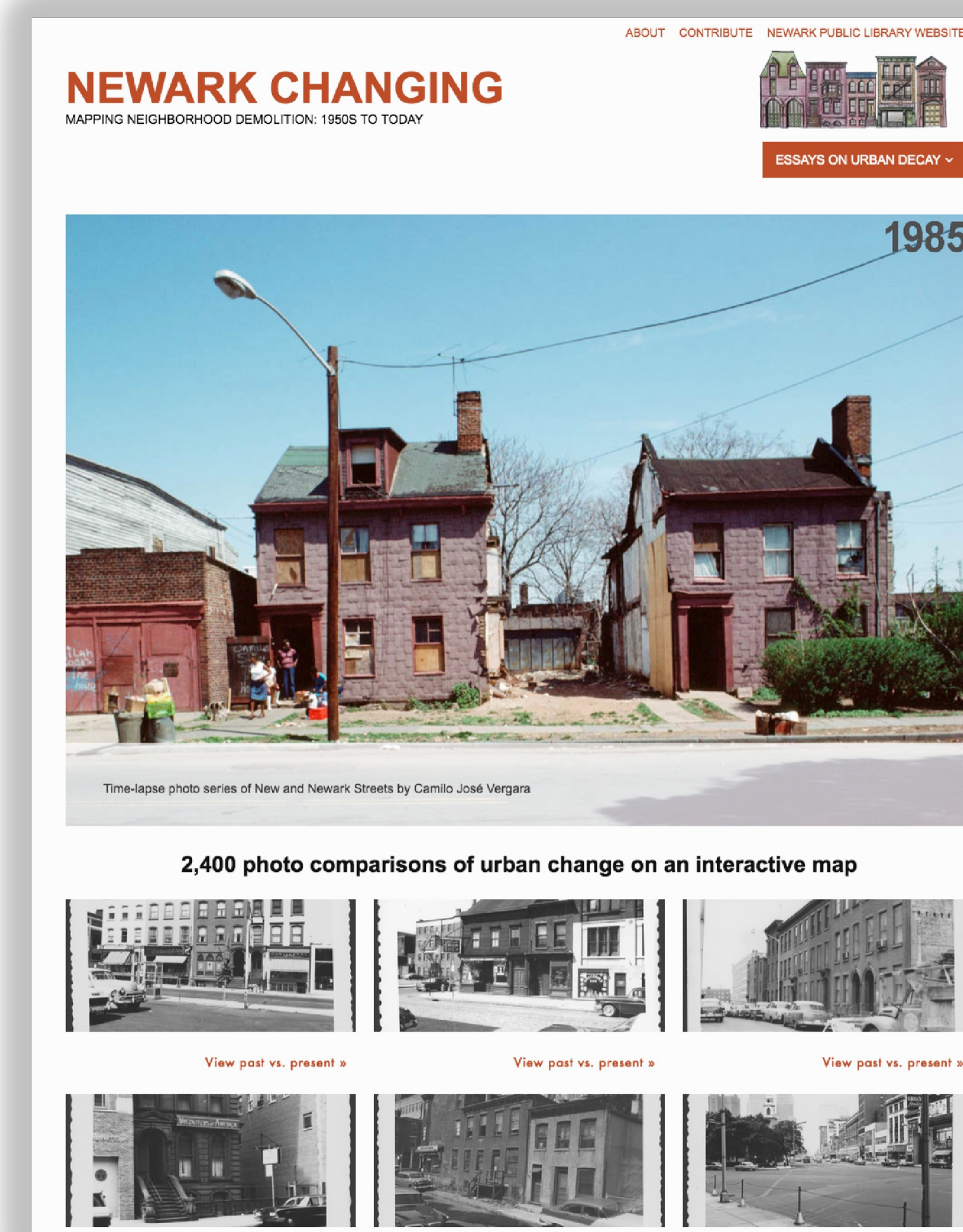
1960s map shows slum clearance areas in red, paths of highways in blue, and Samuel Berg's area of focus.

## Image + Data Workflow:



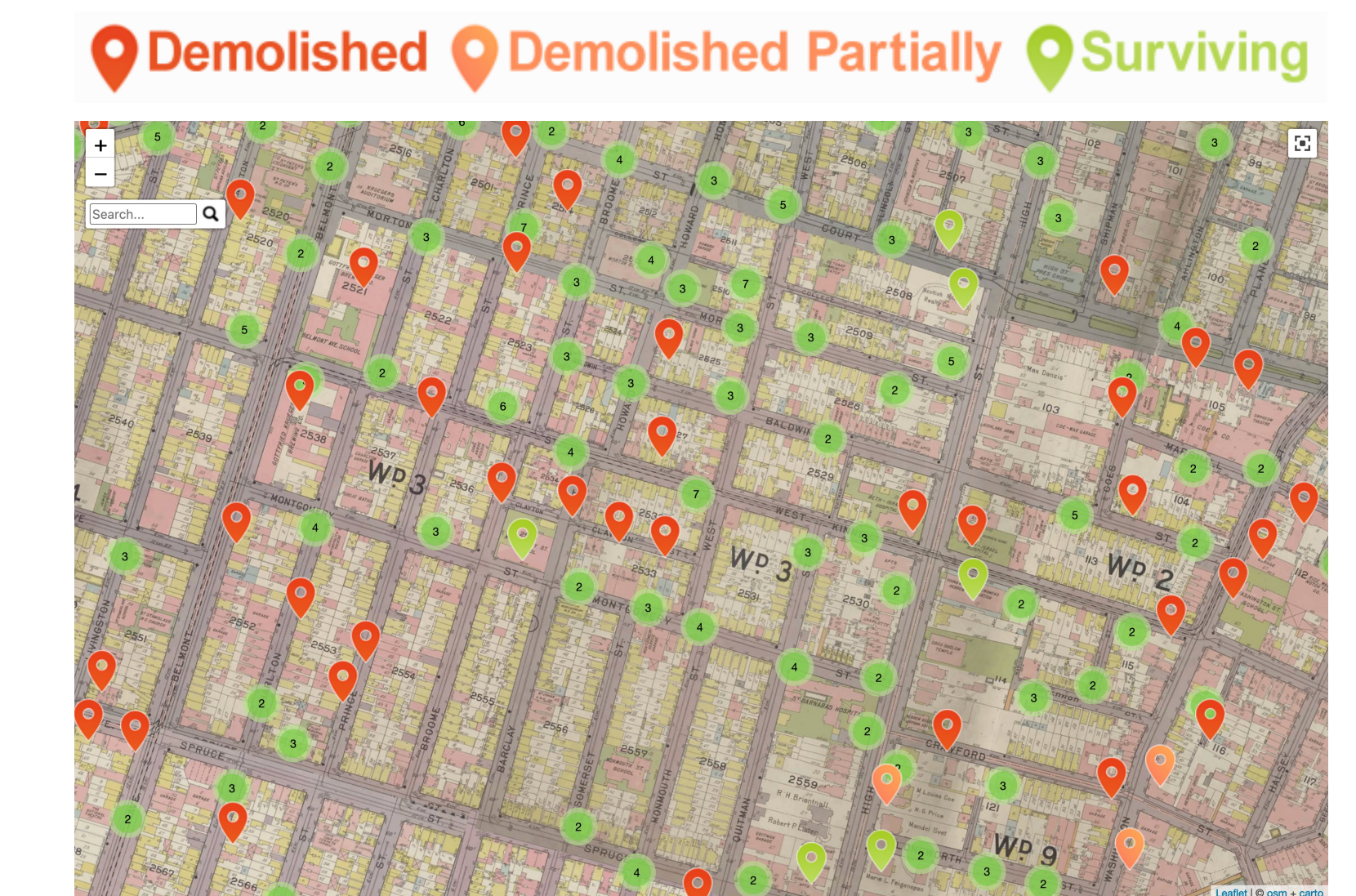
Screenshot of website homepage:

Visit NewarkChanging.org to explore the map. Preferably from laptop:



Screenshot of map interface:

Each dot corresponds to one camera angle and photo location. Dot color indicates whether buildings shown in photo are demolished or surviving.



## Credits and Gratitude:

Mom and Dad. Beth Zak-Cohen, Tom Anker, and George Hawley at the Newark Public Library shared with me the source files and metadata behind this project. The University of Michigan funded my PhD studies.

PhD dissertation committee: Robert Fishman and Ana Morcillo Pallarés (co-chairs) Dan O'Flaherty, Kenneth Jackson, and Matthew Lassiter

Project created in gratitude and memory to the thousands who lost their homes, small businesses, and neighborhood spaces.

## Scan code to launch interactive map:

Or visit NewarkChanging.org/map. This research tool is optimized for full-screen display. View this project from a laptop, desktop, or library computer for the full range of search options. Browse the collection by address, neighborhood, keyword, subject, or historical theme.

