

New Kind of City Emerges Out of Ruins of '68 Riot

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It was a balmy spring evening here 10 years ago when King was assassinated in Memphis. As the news flashed through Washington shortly after 8 p.m., there is an unnatural lull: the paralysis of shock. Then, building slowly at first like some great flood, there followed an enormous rage. Within hours, the flood had grown into a roaring torrent of violence.

One hundred and twenty American cities erupted in violence that weekend. In Washington, where rioting lasted three days, the damage was heaviest. The capital, clouded with smoke and occupied by federal troops, is a mirror into which a horrified nation looked—and itself.

All that seems far off now in these warming days of spring a decade later. The enormous grace and charm of this city is never more seductive than at this time of year. Life is returning to the streets. The joggers are out. Everyone is beginning to unlimber from the winter.

Washington has changed, too, in more than these superficial ways. Real American politics came to the city government here with the advent of home rule in 1974, and the energies of local citizens are now being channeled into strong new neighborhood organizations, the playing of campaigns, the forging of embryonic political machines.

Crime is down. The Nixon administration characterized Washington as the crime capital of the nation, but 16 other American cities of comparable size have better records. Relations have improved between the community and the police force, which has changed in racial composition during the decade from one-fourth early half black.

Washington itself is 76 percent black today, about the same racial proportion that it had 10 years ago. But in the city its white population increased for the first time in a quarter century, and many more neighborhoods than before are now in flux with blacks and whites, rich and poor, professionals and working people living side by side door to one another.

Of all the decade's evident changes, one of the most striking has been the building boom in the city that began a few years ago and is now intensifying toward a new pitch. Real estate values are soaring and private money is flowing back into Washington to finance large development projects and widespread rehabilitation of spacious, elegant old houses in what had become blighted neighborhoods.

None of this has happened quickly. For many citizens, the city remained a tense, fearful and stagnant place until well into the early 1970s. For the growing numbers of poor and unemployed here, it remains the same way today—as if nothing had really changed.

But it is not the things that make matters worse for this socioeconomic underclass—a strong disdain for it has developed among