

## College Composition and Communication Conference—Social Justice at the Convention Case Study

### Hazelwood, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is a city of neighborhoods, and these neighborhoods have their own stories to tell. The Hazelwood neighborhood can be found on the southwest side of Pittsburgh, along the formidable Monongahela River. The Hazelwood economy once centered on logging, then on farming, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on steel production. Hazelwood was home to a large “coke” works plant, which refined a coal-based fuel used in the production of steel. During its economic peak, Hazelwood was described as a “bustling community . . . packed with churches, clubs, and shops” and boasting an estimated 13,000 residents,<sup>1,2</sup> including artists such as playwright August Wilson. A city within a city, Hazelwood featured more than two hundred businesses and was a vibrant multicultural neighborhood characterized by prosperity and harmony.

The Hazelwood coke plant, which was considered “the city’s last Big Steel plant,” closed in 1998 and was demolished in 1999.<sup>3</sup> Today, the population of Hazelwood stands at fewer than 5,000. As is the case in many areas that experience drastic economic downturns, Hazelwood’s population decline has led to a decline in local businesses, a rise in unemployment, and an increase in poverty. In current-day Hazelwood, 52 percent of households earn less than \$30,000 per year (as of 2010), and 45 percent of the neighborhood’s population aged 16 or over is not in the labor force.<sup>4</sup> While the crime rate in Hazelwood is better than in some areas of Pittsburgh, gun violence remains a pervasive problem for residents of this formerly prosperous and harmonious neighborhood. From 2010 to 2019, Hazelwood experienced an estimated 7 homicides from gun violence, 37 nonfatal shootings, 34 aggravated assaults with a firearm, and 406 calls to 911 reporting shots fired.<sup>5</sup>

Although recent investments from government grants, university programs, and local foundations have begun a movement to redevelop parts of Hazelwood, today’s residents have a story to tell about what Hazelwood was, what it is, and where it is going.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Consider your own community or a community near you. Has this community experienced an economic change that brought new problems for residents? If so, how

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<sup>1</sup> “The Next Hot ‘Hoods in Pittsburgh.” *Pittsburgh Magazine*, 18 Feb. 2016. [www.pittsburghmagazine.com/the-next-hot-hoods-in-pittsburgh/](http://www.pittsburghmagazine.com/the-next-hot-hoods-in-pittsburgh/).

<sup>2</sup> “Finding Solace After Violence.” *2016–17 Report to the Community*. The Pittsburgh Foundation. <https://pittsburghfoundation.org/solace-after-violence>.

<sup>3</sup> Ackerman, Jan. “Farewell to the City’s Last Big Steel Plant.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 12 July 1999. <http://old.post-gazette.com/businessnews/19990712stacks2.asp>.

<sup>4</sup> *The Hazelwood Neighborhood, 2010*. Program in Urban and Regional Analysis, University Center for Social and Urban Research, University of Pittsburgh. Feb. 2012. <https://www.ucsur.pitt.edu/files/nrep/2010/Hazelwood%20Neighborhood%20Profile%202010.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> “Gun Violence Data.” City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. <http://pittsburghpa.gov/publicsafety/gun-violence>.

has the community dealt with these problems? What do you see as a way forward? If not, imagine the closing of a business or industry that is central to the economy of the community. What new problems might this change bring for the community?

2. If you were a resident of Hazelwood, would you rather stay and try to bring the neighborhood back to what it was, consider a new direction for the neighborhood, or move away and find a new community in which to live and work?
3. What do you see as the rhetorical part of the challenge faced by residents of Hazelwood as they try to return the neighborhood to the prosperity and harmony it once enjoyed?
4. What additional information do you wish you had about Hazelwood to help you understand the situation that residents face? What primary and secondary research might you do to learn more about the situation in Hazelwood?

### **The Hazelwood Composition Case Scenario**

Subject: Neighborhood pride, loss of industry, poverty, urban violence

Audience: The residents of Hazelwood

Objective: Create public dialogue about the history and experience of Hazelwood residents

**Scenario A (No Genre Given):** Imagine that a local Pittsburgh foundation has requested proposals for projects that would give residents of Hazelwood an opportunity to express themselves and relate their experiences in a public forum. Brainstorm a project that you might propose with these residents and articulate your ideas in a formal written proposal that includes the following elements:

- Description of the problem and what you see as the need for residents to share their experiences
- Your plan for a project that would allow residents to tell their stories
- Timeline for implementing the project
- Budget for any anticipated expenses
- Justification for the project—why it would be a great way for residents to express themselves

**Scenario B (Genre Given):** Imagine that you've been asked to work with community leaders and residents in Pittsburgh to design a memorial exhibit for victims of urban violence in Hazelwood. The purpose of the exhibit is to help residents share their experiences as a community and get people outside of Pittsburgh to listen to their stories in the hope that increased awareness will lead to positive change. As assigned by your instructor, work independently or in a group to plan a memorial exhibit for the residents of Hazelwood. Provide details about what the memorial would look like, how residents would be involved, and how the memorial would be publicized.

### **Project in Focus: *I Lived. We Live. What Did We Miss?***

In the spring of 2017, students in a senior capstone course at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Design were tasked with thinking about how the design of a community exhibit could create a space for residents to come together and express something about their community.

The professors for the course, Kristin Hughes and Dylan Vitone, asked students to think about a problem that has plagued many urban communities for several decades—gun violence.

To better understand the subjects of urban violence and economic loss in Hazelwood, the designers conducted secondary research on the social determinants of a healthy community and conducted primary research by meeting with Hazelwood residents and community leaders to better understand their experiences. One leader, the Rev. Tim Smith of Center of Life church, joined the designers in their classroom as an adjunct professor; the designers also met regularly with other leaders and residents in Hazelwood. Through this primary and secondary research, they learned about what Professor Hughes describes as “a collision of systemic loss (of industry, jobs, residents, infrastructure) and personal loss (victims of gun violence, memories of the old Hazelwood, remembered feelings of safety, and loss of identity).” Residents expressed feeling that they were being told to “put a Band-Aid over the loss” if they didn’t like what their neighborhood had become. With this information in mind, the designers began to think about an exhibit addressing hope and “what it takes to care.” The group decided that the ultimate purpose of their design was to get members of the general public to notice what was happening in this community and—if possible—to care.

Thus, the designers decided that the audience for their exhibit would include not only Hazelwood residents but also members of the broader public. They wanted people to learn what Hazelwood had been and what it is today so that they could think about what it takes to care about this place and its residents, both in the present and in the future. As they thought about their audience, they considered the primary and secondary research they had done. They were aware that the public memory of Hazelwood recalled a vibrant and diverse community with nice schools, barbershops, and community gardens. Yet when they reviewed current media coverage of Hazelwood, they found mostly negative stories about people of color afflicted by systemic loss and violence. Positive stories tended to focus on the old industrial site, now known as Hazelwood Green, which is being redeveloped by wealthy institutions in the city.

The design they ultimately created made use of the common spaces of a home (e.g., kitchen, bedroom, living room, porch), with each room emphasizing memories of Hazelwood and its residents. This design, focused on the community’s memories, both recent and farther in the past, emphasizes the role of objects in relation to memory. For instance, one installation features kids’ drawings that portray memories of drive-by shootings on Halloween and memories of funerals as holidays because that’s when they would see their whole family. Visitors hear from a mother—Lenore—who lost all three of her sons in six weeks and from a father who, while in prison, learned of his son’s death from a newspaper clipping that he still keeps in his wallet. Visitors also see objects such as hats and boots that relate to old memories of Hazelwood’s steel industry and learn about community champions who have overcome the neighborhood’s problems. In addition, they see an altar space covered with empty picture frames and possessions that family members have held onto from shooting victims. The exhibit’s final space

asks people what they'll be responsible for—how they'll take action. To see images from the installation and learn more about the project, visit the student designers' [blog page](#).

The approach that the designers took in *I Lived. We Live. What Did We Miss?* is just one of many paths that could have been chosen. Based on their research and planning, the designers felt that in order to communicate the collision of systemic loss and personal loss, it was critical to get people to leave their own neighborhood and come to Hazelwood. The designers felt that they needed to get people to show up physically and interact with possessions, objects, and images, because if they did, then they couldn't help but leave with awareness of the personal and local nature of this problem.

The exhibit has drawn more than 2,000 visitors from 25 countries. In response, some visitors have begun to think about what it took for them to care about this community, and one social worker has even volunteered to run grieving groups in the community. In this way, the design has persuaded some community members to care. In 2019, the exhibit traveled to be on display at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh. After the public success of the exhibit, including coverage by [local radio stations](#), [magazines](#), and [newspapers](#), residents told the designers that it has helped them feel proud of Hazelwood, the place they call home.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What do you think of the design created by this group to address this rhetorical situation?
2. What do you see as the core message or idea that the designers wanted to communicate about this subject?
3. What aspects of this design required research on the part of the designers? How was this design informed by research on the subject matter?
4. What do you think the designers had to consider about audience in creating this design?
5. Do you find this installation to be persuasive? How so?
6. What do you see as the limitations or constraints of this design in moving people?