

5-5-2003

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Debbie Herman  
*Trinity College*

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## Recommended Citation

Herman, Debbie, ““How Civic is the Center?” The Role of Race and Class in the Development Hartford Civic Center” (2003).  
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**“How Civic is the Center?”**

**The Role of Race and Class in the Development of the Hartford Civic Center**

Debbie Herman  
History of Hartford  
May 5, 2003

They speckle the urban panorama of many mid- to larger sized cities such as Hartford. Their nondescript, typically box-like exterior is a testament to the affinity among architects for steel-reinforced concrete as a building material during 1960s and 70s. More specifically, their great numbers illustrate the desperation of community leaders across the nation that drove them to willingly embrace the bulldozer approach to urban revitalization that typified the 1960s. When it opened to the public with great fanfare in January of 1975, the Hartford Civic Center, then billed as the largest entertainment and conference facility in New England, was widely heralded as a progressive solution to the problems of decline in the central business district. When all was said and done, 70 million dollars were expended, 25,600 cubic yards of concrete poured, 250,000 cubic yards of earth moved, and 2,200 tons of reinforced steel erected, all in an effort to reverse the tragic and accelerating decay of the urban core.'

Hartford's own leviathan is located on a **7.5-acre** tract bordered by Trumbull, Ann, Asylum, and Church Streets. The area was designated as blighted in the early **1960s**, which qualified it for federal money made available as a provision of federal Housing Act of 1949. According to David Schuyler, the somewhat loosely defined specifications of what constituted blight gave municipal authorities considerable control over local redevelopment **initiatives**.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent revisions to the act in 1954 and 1959 allowed local governments to expend ten and later twenty percent of urban redevelopment funds on non-residential **projects**.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the federal government provided municipalities across the nation with a power vehicle to excise dilapidated sections

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<sup>1</sup> Memo **from** Dick Bergstrom, City of Hartford. Facts Sheet Re. The **Hartford** Civic Center, **January** 1975 (?), Hartford Studies Project, Trinity College.

<sup>2</sup> David Schuyler, *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1940-1980* (University Park, Pa.: **Penn** State Press, 2002): 4-5

located on the fringes of the central business district, many of which housed the urban poor, and replace them with tax-generating commercial projects.

The genesis of the Hartford Civic Center represents the Zeitgeist of the post-war era of urban redevelopment. It reflects the concerns with race relations, housing, class urban flight, and a shrinking urban economic base that typified this period. Using the Hartford experience as a model, this paper examines how the design and use of the Civic Center complex, its promotion by civic boosters, and later public reception both reinforced and reflected a persistent dialectical tension between black and white, rich and poor, urban dwellers and suburbanites, regionalists and home rulers, commerce and social services. As a subset, <sup>of what?</sup> the sixteen year period that elapsed between the project's initial proposal in 1959 and its dedication in January 1975 provides a window through which to examine how the massive demographic shifts and social changes then taking place in Hartford framed or modified arguments for or against its construction.

Although the idea of constructing an arena to honor the veterans of World War II was initially proposed in 1945, the proposal gained momentum when it was presented as part of the 1959 Hartford city plan prepared by the Baltimore architectural firm, Rogers, Taliaferro, Kostritsky and Iamb. The local newspapers heralded the plan, which included a revamping of the downtown shopping district and the addition of a shopping center, as a means to compete with shopping centers that were beginning to dot the suburban landscape! It was argued that Trumbull St., the proposed site of the coliseum, would provide a powerful stimulus to redevelopment of the dilapidated West Side of downtown, in addition to serving as a counterpoise to redevelopment projects, such as Constitution

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Zabroski, "Planner Will Unveil Downtown Renewal," *Hartford Courant*, 1/24/59, 1.

Plaza on the East Side. As early as 1959, the polarization of Hartford from its suburbs became abundantly clear as community leaders speculated whether the suburbs would be content simply to watch their ailing parent **wither**.<sup>5</sup> The Baltimore firm concluded no less than a 10 million dollar downtown revitalization plan could prevent decline of the city's grand list, which reflected the value of taxable property. This descent would contribute to an already rising mill rate, thus shifting the burden of taxation onto city residents and exacerbating a mass exodus of the middle class (Table 1).<sup>6</sup>

Table 1. Rate of Taxation/Indebtedness, Hartford

	1950	1959
Mill Rate	37.5	46.7
Net Bonded Debt	\$7,176,367 <sup>7</sup>	\$24,989,400.
Indebtedness	\$9,421,000.	\$25,278,000 <sup>7</sup>

Figures taken **from** the Connecticut State Register and Manual

By the late **1950s**,<sup>7</sup> Hartford, like other northeastern cities, exhibited the obvious signs of deterioration. Reduction in the number of manufacturing jobs available to Hartford's unskilled or semiskilled residents combined with the concomitant demographic **shift** and decline in the city's population stemming from interstate highway construction and federal policies that promoted suburban expansion, led to the onset of a full-blown financial crisis by the mid-1960s. This change in the city's fortunes manifested itself in a precipitous drop in retail sales, which declined as a percentage of total retail sales in the metropolitan area from 37 percent in 1959 to 27 percent in 1968.<sup>7</sup> Given this transformation, Hartford could ill afford to take its preeminence as a regional center of business and industry for granted.

<sup>5</sup> "Hartford's Next 21 Years," *Hartford Courant*, 1/29/1959; Ralph Minard, "Sites Vie for Coliseum: Front St. vs. Trumbull," *Hartford Times*, 6/17/59.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Minard, "Renewal or Tax Dip Choice Facing City," *Hartford Times*, 1/14/59, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Position Paper **from** the Urban Development Committee to The Board of Directors, Greater Hartford Chamber of Commerce, June 10, 1970. Arthur J. Lumsden papers, University of Hartford Libraries,

The thousands of African Americans who migrated from the south to work in the defense industry during the 1940s and 50s were perhaps hardest hit by this decline given their vastly diminished range of choices in housing and jobs. In 1959, though still relatively small in number when compared to the white population (16,500 compared *with 170,599*),<sup>8</sup> a reporter for the *Hartford Courant* observed the growth of the African-American population and their movement outside the boundaries of the **portion** of the North End populated by almost exclusively by African Americans in 1950. Although the writer appeared sympathetic to overcrowded and unsafe conditions in the North End, which he cited as an impetus toward their migration, there is a perceptible tenor of fear evinced in the statistics that presented an African-American birthrate almost 2 ¼ times that of white residents and the distant, almost anthropological tone with which he described this seemingly foreign populace.’

By 1961, the city settled upon the Trumbull St. area as a redevelopment site and potential home for a coliseum. To that end, a bond issue to cover the city’s portion of a 10.6 million-dollar redevelopment plan was passed by voters in a referendum in November of that year. The funds were used to acquire and clear the 7-X acre tract upon which were situated small businesses, rooming houses, a movie theatre, and a YWCA. As a consequence of the bulldozer approach to urban renewal favored during the **1960s**, the land, cleared by mid-decade, lay fallow.

Until 1965, very little progress on the Civic Center project occurred until Arthur Lumsden, then executive vice-president of the Greater Hartford Chamber of Commerce entered the picture. A somewhat controversial man, his politics remained unclear to other

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas F. Walsh, “**Negro** Population Grows — Expands from Northeast **Area**,” *Hartford Courant*, 1/19/59, 4.

community leaders. Depending on whom one spoke to, he was viewed as either an ardent New Dealer or economic conservative.’ What remains clear, however, is that Lumsden as head of the Chamber, though obviously pro-business, was abundantly aware of the massive changes in the city’s demographics and economic fortunes since moving to Hartford nearly a decade earlier in 1956. Reversing the effects of a decade’s worth of decline required no less than a project of the Civic Center’s scale and he would not take no for an answer.

When Lumsden approached Aetna Life Insurance Company in March of 1965 with the suggestion of financial support for the project, the state of Hartford was rather grim. While the region continued to grow and prosper, the city population decreased by 15,000 people, a trend that continued into the 60s and beyond. Although the 1964 opening of Constitution Plaza bolstered the city’s tax rolls, it could not entirely compensate for the precipitous drop in manufacturing employment combined with Hartford’s growing reliance on state and federal aid. In a memo to A. Henry Moses, Vice President of Aetna, Lumsden suggested ways in which the company could assist financially in the “rebuilding” of Hartford. In the concise, direct fashion for which he was well-known, Lumsden laid out a host of projects worthy of the insurance giant’s consideration that included the construction of office buildings, a parking facility, housing, and lastly a Civic Center to be located on the Trumbull redevelopment site. Not surprisingly, the first three suggestions were dismissed by Lumsden as either unnecessary, in the case of the office buildings, or problematic as was cited with the

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<sup>9</sup> William Keifer, “Lumsden Rated Bossy, Creative,” *Hartford Times*, 2/21/68, 1.

parking and low-middle income housing **propositions.**<sup>10</sup> Regarding the proposal for constructing low and middle income housing Lumsden warned:

It is my personal judgement that a single institution like Aetna, building housing to meet the housing needs of the city, may get your company involved with a multitude of problems that would work to the detriment of your community image. The rents charged to sustain such a project would always be questioned by tenants, for example. And, you would also have problems in connection with segregated versus non-segregated housing, as this, in turn, gets you involved in de-facto segregation of schools, new school buildings, the kind of people who make up the population of the city, and a multitude of other problems.<sup>11</sup>

This line of reasoning would prove both ironic and prophetic only two years later in the wake of civil disturbances that took place in Hartford and other cities across the nation. Indeed, **this** failure to acknowledge the dire need for low-income housing came back to haunt the Chamber in the opposition expressed over the Civic Center bond issue in 1968.

Aetna evidently approved of this idea and in November of that year provided the Chamber with a **\$40,000.00** grant to conduct a feasibility study. The Chamber engaged the architectural firm Rogers, Taliaferro, Kostritsky and Lamb, who conducted the 1959 city plan. The resulting proposal called for an 8,000 seat arena, an increase over the 3,000 seat facility recommended in the 1959 plan, a 50,000 square foot exhibit hall, a 1,300 space parking garage, 110,000 square feet of retail space, a twin cinema, and 480,000 square feet of office **space.**<sup>12</sup> Despite the proposed collaboration between the city and a private developer, presumably Aetna, the plan estimated a \$291,000.00 deficit annually for a 9-year period, which would be reduced to \$28,000 for **the** remaining five. These deficits would be absorbed by the city of Hartford or private sources. A provision for

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur J. Lumsden to A. Henry Moses, March 15, 1965, Arthur J. Lumsden papers.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

housing in the Trumbull redevelopment site, though considered in the proposal, was determined better met by the Bushnell Plaza, a 300 unit project for middle to upper income tenants, and at Riverview, a project proposed for 1,300 units of low to middle income housing. <sup>13</sup>

When evaluating the justifications for the Trumbull Center provided by the consultants and ratified by the Chamber it becomes clear that before the 1967 riots in Hartford their emphases were squarely on the economic benefits accrued to the city. Among these, attracting a lucrative convention business was among the most prominent, and a Convention and Visitors Bureau was established in June of 1964 to this end. Lumsden, undoubtedly courting the executives at Aetna, mentions this fact in a letter to Edward H. Warner along with the perhaps overly optimistic observation that a convention hall would bring twenty times the existing convention business to Hartford. <sup>14</sup> The imminent threat of plans for arena and convention facilities in neighboring Springfield, Massachusetts and New Haven likely contributed to this sense of urgency and certainly prompted the enlargement of the coliseum from the earlier plan. The 1966 study also broadly hinted that another major hotel, which would later become the ITT Sheraton, would be needed in order to accommodate major **conventions.** <sup>15</sup>

Project boosters insisted a lucrative convention business would also improve flagging retail activity, a concern particularly in light of competition **from** suburban shopping centers. When not in use for arena events, the parking facilities could be used by daytime shoppers. Supporters of the Trumbull Center contended the inclusion of a

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<sup>12</sup> Trumbull Center Feasibility Study: Final Report, April 13, 1966, Arthur J. Lumsden papers, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur J. Lumsden to Edward H. Warner, Dec. 15, 1965, Arthur J. Lumsden papers.

<sup>15</sup> Trumbull Center Feasibility Study, 39-40.

shopping area within the complex would promote an easily traversed, compact, retail center to satisfy the demands of those accustomed to the layout of regional shopping centers. It was supposed that the addition of plazas, enclosed pedestrian walkways and malls would make shopping downtown a more attractive option in addition to “making double use of the valuable retail core **land.**”<sup>16</sup> Notably absent from these justifications, however, are any references to job creation for city residents or appeals to the facility as a community center that would become more pronounced following the civil unrest of 1967.

The substance of these justifications began to shift, however, in the wake of the riots that gripped Hartford for three consecutive summers beginning in 1967. The economic conditions of the urban poor had not changed appreciably since 1959, in fact they had gotten worse. Although per capita income in Connecticut increased by 33.8 percent from 1960 to 1967, it only increased 27.6 percent among Hartford’s residents, while neighboring West Hartford’s figure grew by 53.1 percent. Accordingly, the average income of a Hartford family in 1967 was **\$9,157.00** compared with **\$15,795.00** for their West Hartford counterparts. One astute newspaper reporter observed this emerging dichotomy of “poor cities and rich towns,” where boundaries were no longer demarcated by railroad tracks, but by the geopolitical boundaries between the **cities** and towns themselves.<sup>17</sup>

What fueled these tensions centered on the increasing concentration of poor people, the majority African American, into overcrowded and dilapidated housing in the

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<sup>16</sup> Memorandum **from** Arthur J. Lumsden to the Urban Development Committee and the Business Area Development Committee of the Greater Hartford Chamber of Commerce, Nov. 27, 1965. Arthur J. Lumsden papers, 8.

North End. The notable lack of job opportunities for the urban poor, reflected in both a growing unemployment rate and a 2 1.5 percent increase in state welfare aid from 1960 to 1967, contributed to the hostility.\* Throughout the second half of the 1960s Hartford's African American community activists decried the failure of the city power elite to make housing and education a priority in the renewal agenda. In ~~the~~ wake of the 1967 riots, Wilbur G. Smith, president of the Hartford branch of the NAACP, read before the delegates present at the organization's annual convention a letter sent to Lumsden on his organization's behalf. The letter implored Lumsden as "a leading spokesman for a **powerful** arm of the white **community**" not to take steps merely to control the present civil unrest, but instead seek ways to implement long-term solutions "made to your organization for many, many years by the local chapter [of the] NAACP and **others.**"<sup>19</sup> The letter also criticized the lack of job opportunities for young minority residents in the city's 3,000 businesses as well as the Chamber's Housing Development Corporation's proposal to build low-income housing in an already overcrowded area.

This lack of commitment to better the lot of the urban poor in Hartford was observed by those outside the city as well. Offering ostensible praise for the revitalization of downtown Hartford through the construction of Constitution Plaza, an article published in *The Providence Sunday Journal* cited the city's almost exclusive focus on commercial projects at the expense of public housing, which the writer observed

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\*"Gap Between City, Suburb Wealth Widening in State, Profile Shows," *New Haven Register*, 12/8/68, 59.

<sup>18</sup> "City Slips in Job Category," *Hartford Times*, 9/12/68; "State Grants to City Up 40% in 7 Years," *Hartford Courant*, 3/3/68.

<sup>19</sup> "Dignity Goal in Hartford Riots," *Boston Herald Traveler*, 7/15/67; Wilbur G. Smith to Arthur B. [sic] Lumsden, July 14, 1967, Arthur J. Lumsden papers.

as running counter to the thrust of the Providence renewal agenda.\*' Despite these criticisms, however, Lumsden defended the Chamber's record of accomplishment on improving the circumstances of the minority poor. When interviewed almost a decade later, Lumsden considered advocating the hiring of minorities, the launching of Project Concern, a voluntary program to bus urban school children to neighboring suburban schools, building 3,000 units of housing for low-income residents, and most of all, the ill-fated Greater Hartford Process, a controversial three-part scheme that included a plan to develop land in North Coventry, a town 15 miles north east of Hartford among the Chamber's accomplishments.\*' However, even Lumsden conceded that despite receiving mild praise from the Kerner Commission for their efforts, the city was worse off than it had been before carrying out many of their top-down initiatives, including the building of Constitution Plaza, Bushnell Towers, an expressway system, and the establishment of a regional planning agency.\*\*

This gulf of opinion between members of the white business establishment such as Lumsden and those of African American community activists such as Wilber Smith would play out in the Civic Center bond issue debate that followed a year later. Sadly, this is one instance of many in which neither side was right or wrong. Rather, the conflict represents the intersection of opposing points of view. In reality, the city's business and political leaders did work on behalf of its poorer residents to a much greater degree than before symptoms of the urban crisis manifested themselves, however, these efforts were perceived by the opposing side as too little, too late, and not carried out with direct input

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<sup>20</sup> "A Masterpiece of Downtown Renewal," *The Providence Sunday Journal*, 12/5/65. Arthur J. Lumsden papers.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Arthur J. Lumsden, May 15, 1975| Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut.

from the communities affected. African American community leaders believed they were at the mercy of the Chamber, and until the city's minority and/or poor residents mobilized politically, the situation was not likely to **change**.<sup>23</sup>

In the wake of this turmoil during the summer of 1967, Aetna extended a generous offer to finance a portion of the Trumbull Center project and serve as developer. Additionally, the company offered to contribute an unspecified percentage of the profits from the private portion of the complex to offset the city's burden." The additional 15 million dollars for the proposed coliseum and exhibition hall would be financed by the city through the introduction of a bond ordinance. In a fashion undoubtedly shaped by existing social tensions, the text of the ordinance emphasized the communal uses of the facility over remunerative **ones**.<sup>25</sup> The public would be provided with an opportunity to express their views in a hearing scheduled prior to the Council's final vote on whether to include it as a bond issue the following November. The hearing and ensuing Council vote would both reflect and intensify existing divisions within the community.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic exponent of the Civic Center, aside **from** the Chamber, was the press. Between June and Election Day 1969, the press launched an aggressive educational program designed to inform readers of the manifold benefits derived from a Civic Center as well as the penalties accrued if the bond issue failed to pass. While the public appeals continued to place emphasis on increasing tax revenues, attracting conventions and trade shows, providing a venue for major sporting events, and stimulating retail trade and other commercial development, there is a perceptible

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> *Common Ground* (Hartford, 1969; produced by Julian Biggs). Courtesy of the **Hartford** Studies Project, Trinity College.

<sup>24</sup> "Aetna Offers to Develop Trumbull Civic Center," *Hartford Courant*, 8/2/67, 1.

augmentation of the entreaties that, the like wording of the bond ordinance, focused on how the Center would improve the social climate rather than the business one. Specifically, job creation for the city's poor crept into the pro-Center rhetoric along with the rationale that increased tax revenues would be channeled toward social services. The justification that the Civic Center would provide a much-needed sense of unity, both within the city itself and with its suburbs was also **presented.**<sup>26</sup>

Despite ardent support by the Chamber and the Hartford press, plus a carefully chosen cavalcade of speakers, including a token African American, assembled by the Chamber to emphasize the project's merits, the heated debate that took place at the public hearing on July 8, 1968 revealed considerable opposition to the Center. Community activists including Wilber Smith of the NAACP chapter, Maria Sanchez and Muriel Johnson of the Council of 12 (C-12), and Sandra Klebanoff of the League of Women Voters disavowed the Center's merits and opined that housing and educational needs should come **first.**<sup>27</sup> Still others rejected the plan on the grounds that Hartford residents should not bear the financial risk and suggested the project be funded regionally or through private investment. Notwithstanding the evening's controversy, the Council authorized the city manager to spend up to **\$60,000.00** to hire a consultant to draft a more detailed plan at the conclusion of the hearing. Though still lacking a final Council vote, it

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<sup>25</sup> *Journal of the Court of Common Council of the City of Hartford, December 5, 1967 – December 30, 1968*, 809.

<sup>26</sup> The articles that appear in the Hartford newspapers emphasizing these points are too numerous to mention. Nevertheless, there are a few particularly noteworthy for their ardent boosterism. Driscoll, Theodore, "Where the Trumbull Center Will Rise: Center Benefits Outweigh Cost," *Hartford Courant*, 6/16/68, 1; "Hartford Needs Trumbull Street Project," *Hartford Cow-ant*, 6/5/68; William Keifer, "Civic Center: Toward a New City," *Hartford Times*, 6/21/68, 1. This article presented the pros and cons via a fictitious round table discussion that included a Times reporter, a member of the City Council, a Chamber representative, a taxpayer, a welfare worker, and an administrator, all of whom proclaimed unanimous approval of the project by the article's conclusion.

certainly looked as though the Civic Center Bond issue would appear on the Election Day ballot.

Although the evening's controversy proved to be the utter antithesis of the appeals to community unity expressed by the Civic Center's boosters, Lumsden and the Chamber continued their advancement of the project despite strong opposition expressed by community activists. This is clearly illustrated in Lumsden's response to a letter sent by Rev. Richard Cockrell, pastor of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Hartford, who suggested the opposition and various stakeholders meet to "talk **frankly** about the kinds of overtones spoken at the hearing . . . concerning the proposed Civic Center." In his reply, Lumsden suggested scheduling a meeting after the September 6<sup>th</sup> Council vote and recommended that discussions should focus on the positive benefits accrued to city residents from an enlarged tax base in the way of housing and education. However, with the passage of the bond ordinance, Lumsden did not feel the need to pursue any **further**.<sup>28</sup>

What certainly **framed** and polarized the debate was the failure of the City Council to authorize a 15.8 million dollar bond issue for the construction of a University Park, a proposal that recommended the construction of a new Weaver High School adjacent to the University of Hartford and would also include the Annie Fisher School. Making things worse, the Council also rejected a two million dollar bond issue to build scattered site housing. Although the Chamber openly stated its support of the rejected proposals, it is safe to say the majority of the Chamber's time, energy, and resources were committed to ensuring the passage of the Center's bond issue. The dismay over the City

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<sup>27</sup> Proposed Schedule of Speakers and Topic for Trumbull Civic Center Hearing, Monday, July 8, 1968. Arthur J. Lumsden papers; "Hearing Asks: How 'Civic' is Center Plan?," *Hartford Times*, 7/9/68, 3B, 7A; Driscoll, Theodore, "Businessmen Back Civic Center Plan," *Hartford Cow-ant*, 7/9/68, 1, 6.

Council's presumable favoring of a Civic Center over proposals that dissenters believed would directly address the needs of the urban poor was best expressed by Muriel Johnson, a neighborhood activist who framed the debate in the following terms:

On July 8, 1968, I flew ~~from~~ Washington to attend a hearing and [it] was all about a Civic Center that was gonna give 400 minority people menial jobs cleaning toilet, sweeping floors, barmaids, to put up this 15 million dollar Civic Center where poor folks can't buy a ticket to attend a theatre there. Where we can't eat or sleep. . . . But they didn't pass a bill for a new educational park because they weren't concerned about our children learning. Aetna Life Insurance [would] rather put up a 15 million dollar bond [for the Civic Center] than put up a 15 million dollar bond for our kids to have a decent school or for the poor people of Hartford to have new housing, now doesn't that say something for this great city of **Hartford?**<sup>29</sup>

The Council's failure to approve the University Park for the November ballot posed a public relations challenge for the Chamber as well. To ensure passage of the Civic Center bond issue meant raising an additional ~~\$20,000.00~~ to further promote the project's merits to the **electorate**.<sup>30</sup> All evidence points to the success of this campaign: the issue passed the referendum by a margin of nearly three to one. One newspaper account of the election optimistically observed that voters in District 3 1, a predominantly African American district, approved the bond issue by a margin of almost nine to one (**437/50**) although in reality an additional 487 votes would have not the slightest hope of influencing the **outcome**.<sup>31</sup> It was, in fact, merely a reflection of the general feeling of powerlessness among the minority population in Hartford during this period when responding to the

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Cockrell to J.M.K Davis, July 15, 1968; Arthur J. Lumsden to Richard Cockrell, Aug. 9, 1968; Margaret W. Lawson to Arthur Lumsden, Nov. 25, 1968; Arthur J. Lumsden papers.

<sup>29</sup> **Common Ground** (Hartford, 1969; produced by Julian Biggs). Courtesy of the Hartford Studies Project, Trinity College.

<sup>30</sup> Arthur J. Lumsden to E. Clayton Gengras, Oct. 4, 1968; Arthur J. Lumsden papers.

<sup>31</sup> William Keifer, "Civic Center **Gets** Big Vote," **Hartford Times**, 1 1/6/68, B1.

dictates of the **establishment**.<sup>32</sup> For better or worse, the Civic Center would become a reality.

Following passage of the bond issue, steps were taken to hire an architect for the project. This process involved numerous site visits to other Civic Centers across the country that culminated in June of 1969 with the appointment of Vincent J. **Kling** and Associates, a Philadelphia firm as principal architect and Harry J. Danos and Associates of Hartford as associate architects. Almost a year later, in May of 1970, the architects submitted a revised plan that proposed enlarging the facility by 13 1,000 square feet and included a larger 10,000 seat arena that would cost the city twice as much as the original proposal. The overrun necessitated yet another bond ordinance, which owing once again to the Chamber's push and attendant support of the press, passed in November of 1970 by a margin of two-to-one. A second bond issue for the construction of an additional parking garage on Church St. passed by a narrow margin. It was thought the vastly increased dimensions of the facility would ensure Hartford's primacy over rival facilities in Springfield, New Haven, and **Providence**.<sup>33</sup> The addition of a **20-story, 400-room** hotel co-developed by ITT and Aetna in March of 1971 sent the total amount allocated to the project from public and private money soaring toward the 80 million dollar mark.

Like the rhetorical evolution of the project's objectives detailed in the previous sections, the progression of architectural designs reflects the shift in social conditions over the course of the project and their impact on notions of modernity in urban space planning. The design dating from 1959 featured four discrete structures, a coliseum, exhibit hall, shopping center and hotel that converged on a large plaza and were

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<sup>32</sup> Common Ground (Hartford, 1969; produced by Julian Biggs). Courtesy of the Hartford Studies Project, Trinity College.

interconnected by outdoor malls. When considered alongside subsequent renditions, it is ironic that this earlier design appears to engender the sense of community utterly lacking in the final architectural plan ostensibly promoted by supporters of the project. By the 1966 feasibility study, however, the complex began to take its present form, a single multi-level structure consisting of elevated pedestrian malls, the various units of which were interconnected by interior “streets”. Unfortunately, the initial design submitted by **Kling** and Associates on the eve of the ground breaking, **which bore** a striking resemblance to the 1959 plan and featured a dramatic, round coliseum, was abandoned due to cost and climate **considerations**.<sup>34</sup>

The overall design of the Hartford Civic Center and numerous others like it was undoubtedly influenced by the work of Victor Gruen, widely credited as the father of the regional shopping center. Gruen later took an intense interest in the revitalization of the central business district through the incorporation of elements proven successful in suburban shopping centers, namely the introduction of covered walkways, fountains, benches and skylights to provide the ambiance of a city street without the perceived dangers. Of course, ample and convenient parking figured prominently in the **formula**.<sup>35</sup> Various writers have observed that the rather imposing, fortress-like exterior of these urban entertainment complexes was by no means accidental. Rather, they fostered a secure and pleasant environment to attract apprehensive suburbanites back to the downtown. Indeed, the principal architect, Lewis Eisenstadt, extolling the merits of the Center’s “urban design” observed that it was entirely possible for a person to park his car,

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<sup>33</sup> Theodore Driscoll, “Center Geared to Pump Excitement into Area,” *Hartford Courant*, 5/30/71, 9.

<sup>34</sup> H. Evan Snyder, et al., “The Hartford Civic Center: A New Urban Energizer,” *Connecticut Architect* 11, no. 2 (1975): 12.

check into a hotel, have a meal, go shopping, see a movie, and attend an event at the coliseum without ever having to go **outdoors.**<sup>36</sup> By the late **1970s,** the failure of Constitution Plaza and its architect's "pure planning" approach to revitalize downtown was negatively contrasted with the virtues of a newer, multi-use facility like the Civic **Center.**<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, this "city within a city", as the Civic Center was described, neither succeeded in luring suburbanites back to mother Hartford nor engendering the sense of community envisioned by the planners and civic leaders. As early as 1980, William H. Wythe astutely observed the deleterious effects of **diffusing** pedestrian activity through the introduction of underground concourses and second-level enclosed walkways on community life, particularly in small to mid-sized cities such as **Hartford.**<sup>38</sup> Sadly, the figurative "city within a city" became, in effect, literal: the creation of a city for visitors and another for its poorer **inhabitants.**<sup>39</sup>

An examination of the shops and restaurant that occupied the Civic Center Mall when it opened in 1975 also reinforces the idea of the Center as a recreational facility for middle-class suburbanites to the exclusion of the majority of city-dwellers. The press described the mall's shops as upscale, and the restaurants as gourmet. An article published in the New York Times that offered premature praise of the Civic Center's role in Hartford's comeback identifies the exclusion of fast-food restaurants and discount

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<sup>36</sup> David Schuyler, "A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race and Suburbanization in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1940-1980 (University Park, Pa: Penn State Press, 2002): 108-109.

<sup>36</sup> "The Architect: An interview with Lewis Eisenstadt, *AIA,*" *Hartford Magazine*, Jan. 1975, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Patricia Lohman, "Constitution Plaza and the Cityscape: After 15 Years, How Has Hartford Changed?," Sunday: The Hartford *Courant*, 6/27/79, 6.

<sup>38</sup> William H. Whyte, "The Humble Street: Can It Survive?," *Historic Preservation* 32, no. 1 (1980): 38.

<sup>39</sup> The concept of the "tourist bubble" is explored in greater depth in Harvey Newman's article, "Race and the Tourist Bubble in Downtown Atlanta," *Urban Affairs Review* 37, no. 3 (2002).

stores as pivotal to the Center's success in attracting upscale tenants and **patrons**.<sup>40</sup> It is a sad irony that 28 years later approximately two-thirds of the mall's storefronts are unoccupied. The reviled chain stores and fast food outlets of decades past have replaced the ones that remain.

The failure of the Civic Center Mall to attract an established clientele might be at least partially accounted for by the accelerated racial and class segmentation of the retail market brought about by the regional shopping center. Historian Lizabeth Cohen argues that when regional shopping center developers set out to "create a more perfect downtown" they excluded from it those groups who failed to conform to a rather monolithic suburban population. Thus, the causes of market segmentation may be viewed as derived both from the geographic isolation of regional shopping centers from the urban core and attempts by developers to reconstitute the downtown center in exclusionary **terms**.<sup>41</sup> Carrying Cohen's argument full circle raises a host of questions, the consideration of which would wind up an entire paper in itself. Assuming suburban shopping malls were designed as exclusionary re-creations of downtown centers, which in turn led to a segmentation of the market based on race and class, how does this theory affect the success of mall-style retailing when the suburban shopping center is transported back to the downtown center as Gruen advocated? Lessons learned **from** the Civic Center Mall would indicate that Cohen's contention had a fair amount to do with its failure. After the initial euphoria that marked the Center's opening diminished, the upscale

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<sup>40</sup> Lawrence Fellows, "A Big Shopping Mall and Lots of People Mark Downtown Hartford's Resurgence," *New York Times*, 1/5/75, D4, 55.

<sup>41</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, "From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar *America*," *American Historical Review* 101 (Oct. 1996): 1059.

clientele headed for the familiar suburban terrain of **Westfarms** Mall and the facility languished.

Ultimately, the planning, execution, and design of the Civic Center subverted the project's aims as a locus of community interaction. Contrary to the goal of uniting a fragmented regional populace expressed by civic leaders following the civil unrest of the late **1960s**, the Civic Center actually exposed and intensified existing tensions divided along racial and class lines. Although the Trumbull Redevelopment project succeeded in its objective to expand the tax base and encouraged new commercial development, this merely perpetuated the increasingly circumscribed role of downtown as a zone of office space, vital only Monday through Friday between the hours of nine and five.

The choice of a commercial project on the Trumbull Redevelopment site was in many respects a foregone conclusion. Although the poorer residents of Hartford were in dire need of new housing, educational and recreational facilities, it is perhaps overly pollyannaish to think a parcel of land in the central business district, an area that encompasses one to two percent of a city's area yet accounts for twelve to twenty percent of its tax revenue, would be allocated to less remunerative **uses**.<sup>42</sup> Still, hindsight affords us the opportunity to speculate whether a provision for housing or more community involvement in the planning might have influenced the **long-term** outcome.

In the lobby of the Civic Center exhibition hall, a plaque commemorates the installation of an elegant granite floor, which appears rather incongruous when compared to the utilitarian concrete steps it precedes.

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<sup>42</sup> Jon C. **Teaford**, "The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in American, **1940-1985** (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990): 19.

The plaque reads:

The floor pattern in this area expresses the purpose of this Civic Center as a gathering place for the individuals of the community. At the center, a large circle and diamond symbolize the Civic Center as a nucleus, around which people join hands in celebration of togetherness.

What is most shocking is that these sentiments were expressed not at the building's dedication, but in **1998!** However, they certainly underscore the basic, timeless human need for a forum to encourage community interaction and public discourse. This hyperbole permeates the justifications for nearly every facility that ostensibly serves the public good. Its rationale carries through to this day with the Adriaen's Landing project, whose convention facilities will, ironically, likely preempt the remaining convention and trade show business eagerly sought by the Civic Center's boosters over thirty years ago.

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