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The Comparative Decline and Revitalization Processes of Hartford and Detroit

Jane Bisson

To some, Detroit, Michigan and Hartford, Connecticut may simply appear to be two struggling and impoverished cities with little potential. However, both cities hold within themselves a thriving past and strong future potential. Hartford and Detroit are desirable cities for the comparison of deindustrialization and revitalization for several reasons. First, their experience with deindustrialization occurred around the same time period. Detroit is a bit larger than Hartford, with a population of over 680,000 versus about 126,000.¹ However, their similar experiences with deindustrialization, and job loss due to globalization, as well as similar strategies for urban renewal make them desirable for comparability. The experiences of Detroit and Hartford, both similar and different, illustrate the ways in which cities in the future may prevent or lessen their economic and social decline. The deindustrialization processes of both cities indicate the vital importance of an urban economy that thrives off of not one, but several different bases. Secondly, these case studies illustrate the best and worst strategies of urban revitalization. Both suggest that the most successful revitalization strategies are ones that encourage people to not only visit the city, but also to live there. To do this, projects must intend to interact with the city in a way that encourages an integrated experience for both tourist and resident alike. With the goal of producing a balance of interested tourists and happy residents in downtown, urban renewal strategies can ultimately produce happier, stronger and more thriving metropolises.

The Rise and Fall of Detroit and Hartford

In order to understand the goals of urban revitalization, it is necessary to understand both what the problems are, as well as the roots of those problems. The histories of both Hartford and Detroit tell a story of a once thriving city that has since been unable to regain its former glory. Both cities were once industrial hubs, and both lost their primary economic base due to increasing cost and international competition.

Now, both cities have impoverished populations and limited urban resources. Though the cities differ in several ways, among which include size, population demographics and urban services, Hartford and Detroit are two cities in dire need of revitalization. Together their demises, coupled with their current attempts at urban reinvention, illustrate strategies for both the prevention of such dramatic erosion of economic bases, as well as strategies of urban reinvention.

Hartford was once a thriving city that today is struggling to regain its former glory. Similar to Detroit, Hartford experienced a boom in industry beginning in the early twentieth century. Large corporations, such as insurance companies, began to invest in Hartford and set up large-scale insurance businesses in the area.² Still today insurance companies are one of the major jobs providers in Hartford. Hartford's workforce as a whole was well educated in manufacturing, thereby attracting major manufacturing companies such as Pope Manufacturing, an automobile manufacturer, as well as Royal and Underwood, both typewriter manufacturers.³ Equally, if not more importantly to Hartford's booming industrial age, was the arrival of Pratt & Whitney, an aerospace manufacturer.⁴ Pratt and Whitney, later with another location in East Hartford, became so important to Hartford's economy that by World War II it employed more than 25,000 workers.⁵ Additionally, the Colt Firearms factory provided manufacturing jobs and contributed to Hartford's thriving industrial economy.⁶ The population of Hartford boomed, attracting immigrants to fulfill the rising demand for labor in the area. Hartford reached its highest population during the manufacturing boom after World War II, rising rapidly from 164,072 to 177,397 between 1940 and 1950.⁷ By the 1950s, Hartford was a robust industrial powerhouse, providing over 30,000 manufacturing jobs.⁸ This prosperity was short lived, however, as the industrial base of Hartford rapidly shrunk, causing the number of jobs provided by manufacturing to plummet to just 20,000 in 1970.⁹

Hartford experienced a period of rapid deindustrialization, due to foreign competition and increasing manufacturing costs. By the 1970s, not only did the number of jobs provided by the manufacturing industry decline dramatically, the racial demographics of the city also rapidly changed. New Deal reforms that encouraged the purchasing of single family homes, white flight and red-lining all caused Caucasian population of Hartford to drop to just 50 percent by 1970, from 90 percent in 1950.¹⁰ Unique to Hartford and very few other cities was the pattern of continued immigration even with a shrinking pool of jobs. By

2010, 41 percent of the population of Hartford was Hispanic, illustrating the continued migration of peoples from Puerto Rico, Jamaica and other Caribbean islands.¹¹ This wave of immigration alongside rapid deindustrialization caused major issues for the city, many of which still persist today. Areas that were once comfortably middle class and stood adjacent to industrial factories were now neighborhoods of poor immigrants next to abandoned warehouses.¹² Also quite unique to Hartford was that during this time of mass deindustrialization and continued migration, the white-collar sector of the city continued to expand. Notably, the insurance industry remained and even grew, now offering jobs to an increasingly white and middle class metropolitan area.¹³ This gave Hartford an unconventional identity, one of an increasingly impoverished city with increasingly wealthy suburbs. In 1990, the United States Census ranked Hartford as the eighth poorest urban population in the United States, an evaluation that has not much changed in recent years.¹⁴

Today, Hartford is a floundering city in a sea of wealthy suburbs. Hartford is the most impoverished part of what is otherwise the wealthiest state in the United States; 30 percent of the residents of Hartford lived under the poverty line in 2002.¹⁵ The city has a homeownership rate of 24.5 percent, making it the second lowest in the nation, behind Newark, New Jersey.¹⁶ Additionally, Hartford has lost 45 percent of its property-tax base since 1990, causing the city government to lose a significant portion of its revenues.¹⁷ The 17 square mile city is almost covered completely in half by untaxable property such as parks, churches, academic institutions and government property.¹⁸ Not surprisingly given the minimal amount of property taxes the city collects, Hartford's education system is severely underperforming. Only 12.4 percent of the city's population holds a bachelor's degree, and perhaps even more shockingly, only 61 percent of adults older than 25 have graduated high school.¹⁹ Most of the problems that Hartford is currently experiencing can be traced back to the city's loss of its major economic base, manufacturing. However, many point to the state's lack of county government as one of the reasons why Hartford has not been able to bounce back the way many other post-industrial cities have. Because there is no county government, Hartford must use its own tax base, instead of being able to benefit from regional taxation and spending that would incorporate the wealth of the suburbs into Hartford itself. At the

same time, many still see Hartford's wealthy suburbs as an advantage to be utilized in revitalization projects, suggesting that these wealthy suburbs have the power to transform Hartford into the bustling, thriving city it once was.

Detroit is perhaps the most well know American example of extreme deindustrialization and its crippling effects. However, the city also has a rich history and an industrial legacy that helped shape its urban form today. In early twentieth century Detroit, there was an explosion of entrepreneurship in the automotive industry.²⁰ The city thrived off of this new industry, and the economy of Detroit soon centered on automobiles. Ford's assembly lines took over, demanding only minimum human skill and plummeting production costs. The assembly line did not just produce cheaper cars; it also produced an industry that demanded little to no education.²¹ Not only did this new assembly line driven industry require less education of the city's populace, it also caused the city to lose the small, competitive and independent firms that once dominated.²² Increasingly, these small firms gave way to massive corporations that took over the industry. By 1955, the Detroit-Windsor metropolitan area was home to three of the five largest corporations on the planet.²³ Dwindling education levels, combined with the loss of small, independent firms set Detroit up for future economic struggles.

Between 1950-1970, under the direction of the "Big Three" American automotive companies that virtually ran Detroit's economy, Detroit was on the rise. In 1955, Detroit was home to three of the five largest corporations on the planet, General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, known as the "Big Three".²⁴ The population of the city peaked at 1.85 million people in the mid twentieth century, and the economy was booming.²⁵ However, the "Big Three" soon began to falter. As soon as 1980, General Motors, Ford and Chrysler began to close down plants, shutting down as many as 128 from 1980 to 2012.²⁶ These massive automobile corporations faltered for several reasons. Globalization is perhaps the most influential force in the decline of industry in Detroit. Firstly, the "Big Three" were unable to keep up with the technological innovation coming from Europe and Japan.²⁷ Also stemming from global competition were increased production costs, as well as rising labor and health care costs.²⁸ Detroit also lost many of its automotive jobs to overseas.²⁹ In 2000, the "Big Three" employed 425,132 people in the United States and 249,622 people abroad.³⁰ In 2010, the number of people employed by the "Big Three" in the United States

had plummeted to 171,200, and the number of people employed abroad rose marginally to 276,800.³¹ These numbers illustrate not only the decline of the “Big Three” globally, but also illustrate the significant job loss in the United States, concentrated in the Detroit-Windsor Metropolitan Area. Additionally, social unrest including racial tensions and strikes stemming from union negotiations affected not only the economic performance of the corporations but also contributed to the rising cost of production.³² It is clear that the automotive industry is declining, and with it Detroit’s economy is faltering.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Detroit’s population declined 24.9 percent.³³ The employment rate of residents of the Detroit metropolitan area also declined by 21.3 percent, including a 52.5 percent decline in manufacturing jobs from 488,000 to 232,000.³⁴ Due to an ineffective government, the city was turned over to over to Kevyn Orr, a bankruptcy lawyer from Washington, D.C. who was considered a state-appointed “emergency manager”.³⁵ Orr, who was not an elected official, was charged with several tasks to help improve the city’s governance: restructuring the city’s debt, formulating a new budget, modifying union contracts, and selling city assets.³⁶ When Orr took over, Detroit had \$64 million dollars in cash but had an outstanding debt of \$226 million.³⁷ In July 2013, the emergency manager and the state governor declared Detroit bankrupt.³⁸ The emergency manager’s report on the state of Detroit illustrated just how desperate the city had become. The police department was deemed “inefficient and ineffective” due to low response times and case closures, the public transit system failed to deliver reliable service, the public parks were unkempt and many headed for closure, and half the street lights in the city were broken.³⁹ In addition, the number of business establishments in the city has plummeted, from about 23,500 in 1972 to about 8,300 in 2002.⁴⁰ The bottom line of the facts and figures illuminating Detroit’s current state of desperation is the simple truth that there are not enough jobs in the city, just 27 jobs per 100 residents.⁴¹ For this reason, it is likely the primary goal of revitalization strategies by the city of Detroit will be to bring more jobs to the area.

The Puzzle of Urban Reinvention: The Cases of Hartford and Detroit

An understanding of the history of Detroit and Hartford illuminates the revitalization strategies each city has chosen to pursue. Both cities faced major deindustrialization after enjoying an age of prosperity driven by manufacturing. Now both cities must face their problems head on: impoverished residents, a shrinking tax base, and minimal job opportunities for the city residents. Both Hartford and Detroit have deployed urban reinvention strategies, some similar, some different. There are several different theories regarding urban redevelopment. One strategy of reinventing post-industrial cities is to redevelop the downtown of the city through investment, including building offices, hotels and entertainment centers.⁴² However, this strategy has its critics, who claim that focusing just on driving investment into the downtown does little to create sustainable economic growth, causes unequal distribution of resources and does not provide quality jobs to lift the residents out of poverty.⁴³ Another strategy is for the city government to formulate policy that attracts investment, with tools such as tax breaks.⁴⁴ Yet another strategy is more indirect, and involves reshaping the governance of the city in order to reinvigorate the city from the ground up.⁴⁵ Both Hartford and Detroit have dabbled in each of these strategies, which represent just three of many. To varying degrees, the two cities have deployed projects based on these theories, in the hope that they will spur revitalization.

In its quest for urban renewal, Detroit has emphasized massive development projects with the goal that these projects will reconfigure and renew the fabric of the city. One of the most famous and prominent of these projects is the Renaissance Center, now called GM RENCEN. Around 1970, the chairman of Ford Henry Ford II had the idea to pool the resources of the car manufacturers in Detroit to help revitalize the city.⁴⁶ Out of this idea rose Detroit Renaissance, a non-profit organization made up of 51 major corporations, including General Motors, Chrysler, American Motors, and B.F. Goodrich, all of which had substantial economic stake in the prosperity of Detroit.⁴⁷ Out of this band of corporations rose the idea for the Renaissance Center, a complex located on the Detroit riverfront. Designed by architect John Portman, this \$337 million dollar complex includes a group of office buildings, shops and a massive hotel.⁴⁸ The plans for the

center included a complex of residential buildings, which were never completed because the project ran out of funding.⁴⁹ The idea for the Renaissance Center was to draw people back into downtown, to shop, eat at restaurants and spend their entertainment dollars.⁵⁰ Its designers wanted to pull people out of the suburbs and into downtown, hoping that once residents experienced the benefits of the city, people would move back in from the suburbs, or at least spend more time and money downtown.⁵¹ However, even the driving force behind the center, Henry Ford II, admitted that the goal was for the project to be “primarily a catalyst to make other things happen” in downtown Detroit.⁵²

To many, the Renaissance Center represents a failed attempt of urban renewal in Detroit. Even as the center was under construction, one of the major criticisms was that the \$337 million dollars used to build the complex should have been spread around Detroit and used to invest in several smaller projects around the entire city.⁵³ Charles Blessing, the director of the Detroit City Planning Commission in the 1970s when the center was being built, criticized the location, which he argued was isolated from the rest of downtown, isolated from the buildings near it on the riverfront, and did not flow with the architecture of the rest of the city.⁵⁴ These criticisms, as well as many others, still ring true today. Many condemn the fortress-like feeling of the center, whose massive parking garages and easy access from the freeways clearly demonstrate the goal of attracting suburbanites.⁵⁵ One of the primary issues of the Renaissance Center is the fact that it, if anything, simply draws people into downtown for a short amount of time, to shop or to eat. Many claim that if the center had included the residential constructions that were originally planned, the complex may have had much more success.⁵⁶ Had people actually lived in and near the center, there may have been more demand for other businesses to open in the area, possibly slowly creating an actual rebirth of the downtown. Though the Renaissance Center by no means represents the consuming rebirth of Detroit it was meant to, it may still offer a glimmer of hope. The purchase of the center by General Motors to be used as its headquarters, as well as other similar investments of corporations looking to move from the suburbs back into downtown, could possibly be a part of the revitalization the Henry Ford II envisioned.⁵⁷

As the Renaissance Center suggests, Detroit has been attempting to move its economy away from manufacturing and towards an economy of consumption.⁵⁸ To encourage a consumer economy,

Detroit has built several casinos, which hope to draw tourists and residents alike.⁵⁹ The idea behind a casino and entertainment-based economy is that casinos are a relatively easy and cheap way to circulate money, and are relatively inexpensive to run, since most employees earn low wages.⁶⁰ Proponents of the casino strategy argue that casinos allow the city to become a magnet for tourism, which then creates demand for more hotels, restaurants and entertainment complexes, eventually revitalizing downtown.⁶¹ In November 1996, Michigan voters approved of Proposal E, which authorized the construction of a maximum of three casinos in downtown Detroit.⁶² The first permanent casino built was MGM Grand, which took over several city blocks and included a hotel and a large shopping center and restaurant complex.⁶³ Later came the Motor City Casino, which took over an abandoned Wonder Bread factory, with 75,000 square feet of gambling and entertainment space.⁶⁴ Finally in 2000, the Greektown casino opened with its own hotel, theater and convention spaces.⁶⁵ The casino initiative has met varied success, with many arguing that it has not revitalized downtown Detroit enough, while some argue that it has impacted some renewal and will continue to in the future.

The success of the casino initiative is still highly debated. In 2006, Detroit had the sixth highest annual revenue of casino markets in the United States, with revenue of over a billion dollars.⁶⁶ However, there are several problems with the casino and entertainment based economy that Detroit hopes to become. Firstly, this kind of success can only be expected in times of economic prosperity. Second, these casinos are making profit from the residents of Detroit, who are as a whole impoverished.⁶⁷ The relative success of the casino initiative, and the ability of the casinos to revitalize the city depend on the individual casino. The Greektown casino has been identified as probably the most successful in affecting the urban form around it.⁶⁸ This success is due to the plan and structure of the casino itself. This is for a multitude of reasons, first of which is because the parking is located over a block from the actual casino, forcing patrons to walk through at least a small portion of the city.⁶⁹ Also, all the restaurants are separate from the gambling areas and are also open at the street level.⁷⁰ Lastly, there are several entrances and exits throughout the casino, which encourages patrons to go back and forth between the city and the casino itself.⁷¹ All of these unconventional designs allow for a positive synergy between the

casino and its neighborhood. Although casinos have the detriment of being susceptible to economic ups and downs, if more casinos are designed to interact with its neighborhood, they have the opportunity to truly revitalize Detroit.

The economic issues facing Hartford are different from those facing Detroit. Hartford has a relatively strong economy, centered on insurance and other high skill industries. The issue with Hartford's economy is its high levels of segregation; commuters fill over 83% of the 121,000 jobs, while 65% of the residents of Hartford commute outside the city for employment.⁷² Instead of trying to bring a whole new economy to the city, like in Detroit, the goal of Hartford's urban renewal strategies is to revitalize its downtown into a 24-hour hub, rather than just a 9 to 5 city. The primary force behind this effort is the Capital Region Development Authority, whose mission is, among other things to "to stimulate economic development and new investment in and around Hartford, develop and redevelop property to attract and retain businesses, and rebrand and promote the district."⁷³ The Capital Region Development Authority is responsible for a multitude of renewal projects in Hartford, namely the Connecticut Convention Center, XL Center, Adriaen's Landing and the Front Street District.⁷⁴ One of the most expansive of these projects is the Front Street District, which has the potential to catalyze the revitalization of downtown Hartford.

The site of the Front Street District had been in the works for decades. In 1988, New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft announced that Hartford would be the new home for the football team, however soon after these plans fell through.⁷⁵ Regardless, the city and state governments of Hartford and Connecticut repurposed the land intended for use as the football stadium.⁷⁶ Although the area lay dormant for some time, the Front Street District Area now is filled with restaurants, theaters, and residential areas.⁷⁷ In addition, the University of Connecticut has plans to open a campus in 2017, which will be designed to intertwine with the city and have synergy with the nearby Hartford Public Library, Wadsworth Athenaeum, Connecticut Science Center and government buildings.⁷⁸ The Front Street project also includes The Front Street Lofts, which will include 121 apartments with high-end amenities, located in close proximity to the restaurant and entertainment district, along with the University of Connecticut campus.⁷⁹ Between the entertainment space, university campus, and apartment complex, it is likely that

the Front Street District in downtown Hartford will be successful, just how successful though, remains to be seen.

The Urban Renewal of Hartford and Detroit: What Works and What Doesn't?

There is quite a bit of similarity in the strategies that Hartford and Detroit have taken to revitalize their downtowns. Though on a different scale, which is expected given the differing sizes of the two cities, both Detroit and Hartford have attempted to draw more people into their downtown through the creation of entertainment hubs. In addition, though both cities had the goal of renewing their downtown, the problems plaguing each city were slightly different, therefore producing slightly different goals. For example, Detroit's goal in building the casinos was to spur a tourist and entertainment-based economy for the city. Contrastingly, Hartford did not necessarily have the goal of creating another economy for the city, as insurance and other similar sectors of the economy are still strong. Instead, Hartford was more interested in becoming a 24-hour downtown, where people both work and live, instead of the commuter-heavy downtown that now exists. Because these renewal strategies are still in progress, both in Hartford and in Detroit, there is no determination of total success or failure. However, some projects have more of a potential to, or have already had success, in renewing their downtown.

The Renaissance Center and The Front Street District both attempted to bring people back from the suburbs into downtown. However, the Renaissance Center was largely considered a failure of urban renewal because it felt disconnected from the space around it, and failed to produce an integrated experience that encouraged visitors to experience the whole of downtown instead of just the center itself. In contrast, The Front Street District is an integrated and multi-dimensional project that includes both entertainment and residential space, which encourage people to both visit and live. It is likely that had the Renaissance Center included the residential dimension that was originally planned, the project would have been much more successful in revitalizing the area. Arguably the most successful casino in renewing the neighborhood around it is the Greektown Casino, which is designed to encourage visitors to interact with the outside as well. Though the Front Street District is still in still in progress, it is likely that because it includes

both residential and entertainment space, as well as a university campus, all of which interact organically with the city around it, the project will be successful in helping to renew downtown Hartford. Overall, drawing upon the urban renewal case studies in Hartford and Detroit, it is clear that the most successful urban renewal strategies encourage both tourists and residents to interact organically with the city around them.

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