

**Shovel Ready: Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place**  
*Rethinking Schenectady's Downtown Strategies*

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by Christopher Patrick Spencer

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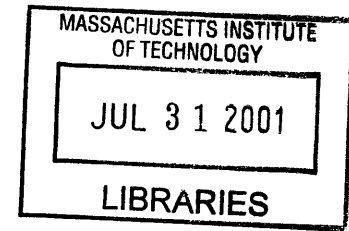
Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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at the

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**ROTCH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

American industrial cities, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest, have seen a steep decline in manufacturing jobs over the past 30 years. For those cities whose economies were not diversified and relied on one or two major companies for their employment base, the job loss has been particularly crippling. This decline, coupled with the flight of retail, service, and other jobs to the outlying suburbs as well as a loss in upper- and middle-income residents to those same areas, has left many cities decimated. Perhaps nowhere has the effect of this been more apparent than in the downtown areas of these cities.

This thesis will examine the growth and decline of the downtown in American cities as well as the development of one city's downtown in particular, Schenectady, New York. A number of interventions, projects, and proposals that have been part of the struggle to reverse the decline of that city's core will be examined. These will be considered within a problem-solving process to discover where assumptions were faulty or where externalities negatively influenced them—contributing to missed objectives and goals. Where applicable, alternative means of reaching the stated goals will be explored. This thesis will also explore the idea of a community vision and explore the role it plays in determining the direction that downtown revitalization takes.

After outlining the past interventions, this thesis will consider and evaluate the current programs, projects, and organizations that are involved in the latest round of redevelopment efforts in the downtown. It will look at the assets that the city should consider building on as well as the liabilities that are holding it back. This thesis will also make recommendation for future strategies and consider the questions: What makes a healthy, downtown, and how can Schenectady direct its efforts toward achieving this goal? and Are the current projects and likely to bring the city closer towards that objective, and if not, what other options should be explored.

*Thesis Advisor:* John de Monchaux

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## Acknowledgments

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As much as this thesis is presented as the work of one person, it would not have been possible without the help from so many. I would like to thank John de Monchaux, my thesis advisor, for his many thought-provoking contributions, guiding spirit, and ever-calming presence; Anne Spirn, for her encouragement and inspirational comments; and John Onofrey for his fine last-minute editing.

Without listing every course and professor at MIT and Roger Williams University, I would like to express my appreciation for all those professors and colleagues who have had an impact on shaping my understanding of the built environment and its impact on the people who are part of it.

I am grateful to the many people in Schenectady who graciously gave up so much time to sit and share their insights and opinions about the city. The archival research was greatly assisted by those at the Public Library, the Efner History Research Center, the Historical Society, and The Daily Gazette.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my family for all the encouragement they have given me in my educational endeavors and for feeding me every time I was in town doing research but too busy to stay and visit. But most of all, I would like to thank my parents, who have taught me so much about community through example. Despite hectic schedules over the years, neither of them have ever been too busy to reach out to those in need and play an integral role in improving their community.



## **Table of Contents**

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Abstract .....	3
Acknowledgments .....	5
Introduction and Thesis Outline .....	9
Section I : Background on Downtowns.....	15
Chapter 1: Downtown Growth and Decline .....	17
Chapter 2: Schenectady’s Downtown Story.....	29
Chapter 3: Character, Image, and Other Reasons Downtown is Important .....	39
Section II: Schenectady’s Planning Background .....	49
Chapter 4: Urban Renewal and Yesterdays’ Town of Tomorrow .....	51
Chapter 5: Assumptions and Directions and an Overall Vision .....	63
Chapter 6: Rethinking the 22 Block Urban Renewal Project .....	73
Chapter 7: Other Projects to Learn From .....	81
Section III: Schenectady’s Future .....	93
Chapter 8: A Tale of Two Downtowns.....	95
Chapter 9: Understanding Downtown’s Direction .....	103
Chapter 10: New Initiatives for an Old Downtown.....	117
Findings and Conclusions .....	135
Chapter Endnotes .....	145
Bibliography .....	155
Illustration Credits .....	161





## Introduction and Thesis Outline

Lively and healthy downtowns are typified by a complex network of interwoven and interdependent activities and users, interacting in close proximity within an environment that is constantly changing. Each change in use or user has the potential of affecting many other uses or users of that environment. This complexity and interdependency makes diagnosing and solving the types of problems that invariably occur extremely difficult and far from certain. The problems of a city and its downtown are also inextricably tied to the surrounding neighborhoods, towns, and outlying cities as well as external factors of which cities have little control over. To say that a city could solve the problems of its downtown without considering federal and state policies that affect it, land-use decisions that border it, initiatives that nearby cities have engaged in, or changes in the economy at large would be necessarily naïve. By clarifying the planning process and understanding their goals, cities will more easily be able to frame their problems and create strategies and objectives to reach their goals. By exploring their built environment and the many forces that have shaped it, cities can begin to understand where they are and begin to articulate a vision for where they want to go.

This thesis is an examination of one particular city, Schenectady, New York, and the problems besetting its downtown, which today is a largely vacant and underutilized area of the city. It is one of the many liabilities within the city that needs to be turned into an asset. Although many of the local case studies and initiatives examined are particular to Schenectady, the lessons learned and the approaches outlined might be of use to many small- or mid-sized cities. In addition, the concept of projecting an image and considering what their story is, will also have relevance to other cities.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

This thesis is divided into three sections, with a number of chapters within each relating to the overall theme of the section. Section One will provide background material on downtowns in general as well as background on Schenectady's downtown. Chapter One, *Downtown Growth and Decline*, will consider the development of the downtown in American cities from the mid-1800s until the present. It will consider some of the differences in size, and outline some of the general forces that have affected them and the solutions that have generally been employed to deal with them. Chapter Two, *Schenectady's Downtown Story*, will look at how the city and downtown relate to the site of its original settlement, and track some of the major forces that have affected it since that time. It will also briefly cover some of the planning and redevelopment issues that the city has dealt with and highlight some of the projects as they relate to what was going on in the national scene as described in the first chapter. The final chapter of this section, Chapter Three, *Character, Image and Other Reasons Downtown is Important*, will underscore many of the positive effects a downtown can have on the city as well as outlying towns and suburbs. An understanding of why downtowns are important and the roles that they play or should be playing is crucial to the mission of cities that have embarked on programs to revitalize their core. Without this background and understanding, it is difficult to respond to the many critics who question why so much time, energy, and money should be spent on the downtown.

Section Two of this thesis will deal with past projects and proposals that occurred in Schenectady. The first chapter within this section, Chapter Four, *Urban Renewal and Yesterday's "Town of Tomorrow,"* will deal with grand visions of the past, starting with Schenectady's "1947 Town of Tomorrow" plan and the many urban renewal schemes that followed throughout the 1950s, 60s and even into the 70s. Although they started as a number of individual projects, they were collapsed into one major project that erased a residential section of the downtown east of the City Hall. Chapter Five, *Assumptions, Directions, and an Overall Vision*, will look at the planning process as a simple problem solving process and explain where many of those plans, projects, and initiatives seem to go wrong. Chapter Six, *Rethinking the 22 Block Urban Renewal Project*, will build on the tools and understanding developed in the previous chapter, and

## Introduction and Thesis Outline

consider what alternatives Schenectady could have explored by using the simple problem-solving technique described. It will also look at what effect the overall vision or story of the downtown has on its direction. Finally it will consider the effect that a different way of thinking would have had on the form of the city. Chapter Seven, *Other Projects to Learn From*, will briefly outline a few other projects that occurred in the downtown and apply the model of thinking and problem solving to see where they went wrong and consider if the mistakes could have been avoided.

Section Three will consider the future of Downtown Schenectady. Its first chapter, Chapter Eight, *A Tale of Two Downtowns*, will consider two different downtowns in transition as well as the directions that either could take and where it might lead them. Chapter Nine, *Understanding Downtown's Direction*, will consider the trajectory that different decisions and projects have for downtowns. It will look at the current developments that are underway in Schenectady, and explore the characteristics of those types of developments and consider what type of downtown they are leading to. Chapter 10, *New Initiatives for an Old Downtown* will make recommendations about Schenectady's downtown and consider developments and initiatives that would help direct it towards being a downtown of character, hope and sense of place.

Although the point of this thesis is to add to the discourse of downtown revitalization, it will not be filled with prescriptive fixes or formulaic models that can be applied to Schenectady. In some ways, this approach has been tried in the past and the current condition of the downtown will easily illustrate the ineffectiveness of such an approach. This thesis is written with the clear understanding that even with endless research, it is almost impossible to understand how or why each decision was made. Likewise, it is impossible to know for sure what motivated the people involved, or what assumptions led them to believe that the proposal they were advocating would solve the problems that they had identified. But through published reports, press releases and other documentation, we can begin to get a picture of the public side of what the goals and motivations behind each project were. But more importantly, the outcome of each project will help illustrate the effectiveness of each.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

In some ways, this thesis tells a set of stories about the circumstances and outcomes of the various attempts to repair the downtown of Schenectady. As Kevin Lynch wrote in *A Theory of Good City Form*, “The city may be looked on as a story, a pattern of relations between human groups, a field of physical force, a set of linked decisions, or an arena of conflict.” In many ways, when a city begins to understand the story of its past and the forces that have shaped it, it can begin to look at adding to that story and developing an image that it wants to project. When the story is only about the past, or concentrates exclusively on the present, the story is inevitably stagnant and dull. When the present is seen as part of the continuum, the story can be rich and meaningful, as many cities have found. Many of these cities which are talked about as *comeback cities*, *cities back from the edge*, cities that have been *revitalized*, *reborn*, or *renewed*, have rediscovered their story, capitalized on it to create a new image, and used it to guide their revival. Providence, Rhode Island’s renaissance is a story of a once forgotten river, uncovered and brought back to life. Lowell, Massachusetts’ rebirth is the story of rediscovered mills and a city that continues to learn from itself. Saratoga, New York’s success is one of renewed respect for historic resources and the stories behind them. Each of these cities has figured out that before you can get others to discover your city, you must rediscover it yourself.

In many ways, this thesis is a series of stories, linked by time, location, and process. It is a story about a city filled with thousands of citizens who give up so much of their time in an effort to improve their community. It is a story of a business community that has historically tried to come together to solve the problems of the downtown. It is about architects and planners who have worked tirelessly to try to dream and envision what Schenectady could be. It is a story of politicians and other leaders who have worked hard and fought against tremendous odds to “bring back the downtown.”

But unfortunately it is also the story of a city that has yet to realize the potential of two of its greatest downtown assets—its buildings and its story. It is a story of political infighting, and coalitions often based on power rather than on sound ideas. It is a story of a city that has failed to coordinate the many disparate efforts of individuals and groups working hard to save the downtown. It is a story of leaders whose under-

## Introduction and Thesis Outline

standing of preservation is more out of date and obsolete than the buildings they claim are no longer of use. It is story of a city that has yet to discover the many benefits of a small, coordinated and incremental approach to revitalizing the downtown. It is the story of large projects and the seduction of big, and quite often, federal money.

But perhaps most unfortunately, it is a story of a city that has spent the last 50 years gradually (and sometimes not so gradually) erasing the history of its previous 100 years. It is sadly the story of lessons learned, unlearned and not yet re-learned. It is in essence, the story of a city that has yet to discover its own story. This thesis is written with the hope that it will add to the dialog, expand the visions, and play some part in getting Schenectady to rediscover and perhaps tell a new version of its story so that it can begin to write the next chapter.



**Section I:**  
Background on Downtowns





## Downtown Growth and Decline

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*The city is crumbling, it cannot last much longer;  
its time is past. It is too old.*

**Le Corbusier**, *The City of To-morrow and Its Planning*

There seems to be no shortage of theories or explanations about the decline of the American downtown over the past 50 years, or what, if anything, should be done about it. For each city that has managed to reverse their downtown's decline, there are explanations about why they were able to do it—and how everyone else could too. But in reality, the downtown of every city is its own place, and the problems that each one faces are different. A big city's downtown is much different from that of a small- or mid-sized city. The downtown in a coastal city is markedly distinct from one in the interior of the country. Southern downtowns are not exactly like Northern ones. The downtown of a New England mill town is not the same as that of a post-industrial, mid-Atlantic or Midwestern rustbelt city. And even within one state, a differentiation can be observed between a downtown in a city that is more isolated versus one that is in a city surrounded by other cities and suburbs. And yet despite the obviousness of this, cities continue to transfer strategies or projects that appear instrumental in revitalizing another city's downtown to their own without considering how the two cities or even their downtowns differ. A convention center that has been a boon for one downtown may be a bust for the next one. The arts and entertainment district and riverfront revitalization that sparked Providence's renaissance, for example, will not benefit all cities—especially those that don't have a river running through their downtown or an active arts community. This is not to say that one city should not study the success of another, but they should, at the very least, be aware of their difference, and the need to adapt strategies to fit their own city's needs.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Adding to the difficulties for many of the small- to mid-sized cities such as Schenectady is that the overwhelming amount of literature dealing more directly with the problems and fixes is targeted to much larger cities. Much of what is commonly noted as vital to making a city great is also focused on the big city. At the other end of the spectrum, the more holistic approaches, such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Program, have for the most part, only been implemented in much smaller cities or towns—typically with populations under 50,000. For cities that find themselves in the middle, or more likely on the outside of this discourse, there are lessons to be learned from both the successes of revitalized small towns and the larger cities that are widely considered to have *come back*. But for United States cities of almost every size, advancements in transportation and communication systems, innovations in building materials and technology, shifts in governmental policies and programs, and changes in personal preferences have all had an enormous impact on their rise and fall.

For many American cities, the site of the downtown is closely linked to that of their founding. Access to the water, suitable land for farming, and an innate natural beauty, were often among the criteria for the location of early settlements. Whether the primary industry was boat building, fishing, farming, or manufacturing, the downtown area, although often largely residential at first, evolved into the center for trading and commerce. The residential character slowly changed to become a mix of mansions, dwellings above shops, apartment buildings, and tenements. Without a viable transportation or communication system, the cities were initially limited to about two to three miles across, or an area not much further than what a person could comfortably walk in about an hour.<sup>1</sup> In the formative years of downtown growth, the realistic commuting limits meant that a greater spatial distribution of residences was not possible, necessitating a much closer proximity between housing for rich and poor than exists today.

The first wave of people to begin to build outside of the city limits or at least beyond the walking city, other than farmers, were the more well-to-do mill owners, bankers, and prominent businessmen. Transported by rail or coach, some were lured to the countryside after being exposed to the images of Arcadia by Thomas Cole and the Hudson River school of painters and by the romantic writings and idyllic designs of

## Chapter 1: Downtown Growth and Decline



**Fig 1.01**

*Starting in the mid-nineteenth century those who could afford to found respite from the ills of the city in more sylvan settings such as this.*

Andrew Jackson Downing. Trained as a nurseryman, and influenced by the architect Alexander Jackson Davis, it was more Downing's picturesque settings rather than his designs that captivated the city audience. He espoused a place free from the evils of the city and one which was an improvement on the crudeness of the truly rural habitat. Although he hoped to discover a uniquely American architecture on the way, his emphasis was on creating a place of repose and civility. In *The Architecture of Country Houses*, originally published in 1850, Downing writes:

*It is the solitude and freedom of the family home in the country which constantly preserves the purity of the nation, and invigorates its intellectual powers. The battle of life carried on in cities, gives a sharper edge to the weapon of character, but its temper is, for the most part, fixed amid those communings with nature and the family, where individuality takes its most natural and strongest development.*

The latter half of the 19th Century saw a number of technical innovations that added to both the growth and in some ways decline of the American downtown. In 1850, the idea of commuting to the city on a daily basis for work was not common or easy. Commuting by train was limited by the location of rail lines and the frequency of their stops. Another option, the urban stage coach, or omnibus, which had been around since 1826 was slow and tended to be rough on the unimproved roads and cobblestone streets.<sup>2</sup> With the advent of the horsecar, still pulled by horse but riding on a set of rails, the ride became much smoother. However, it was relatively slow and steep inclines were difficult for the horses to manage. They were other problems as well. "They created a noisome public health problem with their manure and when they dropped dead on the city streets, a frequent occurrence—15,000 a year in New York at the turn of the century. Feeding and stabling them was expensive and took up a lot of space."<sup>3</sup> With the advent of the electric streetcar in the 1880s, a number of areas outside the downtown began to be developed primarily for residential use. Now a second wave of people, including middle income families, began to move out of the downtown into what the urban historian Sam Bass Warner has called the "streetcar suburbs."

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Streetcars that connected many of the outlying areas to the downtown, combined with a lack of working, shopping, or entertainment alternatives, kept the downtown viable and lively during the day and into the evening despite the dwindling population. In many larger cities, however, the depopulation of the downtown area, or central business district as it was quickly becoming known, had happened much faster and earlier. In cities like New York, which were growing rapidly, the success of the business center spelled the end for residences in those areas. Development and real estate pressures forced or persuaded many people to sell their homes and move to the periphery. Rising land values had created a market that naturally sought out the “highest and best use” of land which was no longer residential. Instead, the new uses included stores, office, workshops and warehouses. Robert Fogleson, MIT professor and urban historian, illustrates New York’s situation in 1836 in *Downtown: A Troubled History*. Quoting from *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851*, he writes: “Almost everybody downtown is in the same predicament, for all the dwelling houses are to be converted into stores. We are tempted with prices so exorbitantly high that none can resist.” This out-migration of many former downtown residents caused noticeable changes in other cities too, as Fogleson points out:

*Downtown slowed down at night, after the stores, offices, and other businesses closed. Downtown Philadelphia, a guidebook pointed out in the early 1870s, ‘though bustling and noisy enough during business hours, is a perfect desolation after six o’clock, and the thousands who throng there all day long are miles away, resting, most of them, in comfortable homes, with plenty of living room about them.’<sup>4</sup>*

The separation of businesses and residences, although virtually complete by the end of the 19th century in many larger cities, did not happen all at once in the smaller ones. While new transportation systems allowed for a more diffused city and a more spatially distributed class of citizens, they also played a major role in the growth and popularity of the downtown. In the larger, faster growing cities, “Businesses were faced with three choices: to leave downtown, push at it boundaries, or build upwards. All three actions occurred and the functional, spatial and visual characteristics of the downtown changed.”<sup>5</sup> In the large



**Fig 1.02**

*The early streetcars allowed for development outside of the city center and beyond the “walking city.”*

## Chapter 1: Downtown Growth and Decline

cities, the new use of steel and earlier technological advances in elevators allowed these metropolitan areas to expand upwards in a way that masonry construction would never have permitted. Advances in glass, iron, and eventually steel gradually changed the look of storefronts—from a series of multi-light windows placed between structural supports to large expanses of glass, spanning the entire front of the building.

Despite romantic visions of the downtown of the early 1900s, the streets were often a miserable and dangerous place to be or navigate. With throngs of people working, living, and shopping in the downtown, the streets were at times completely impassible. Originally laid out and developed around simpler transportation systems, downtown streets were now choked with almost every mode of transportation imaginable, all competing for a limited amount of space. The center of the street was reserved for but not limited to electric and horse-drawn streetcars. Elsewhere, private automobiles, delivery trucks, pedestrians, and horse-drawn carriages jockeyed for position. Adding to the chaos and danger were the powerful and fast moving locomotives that often steamed across these busy streets at grade—with no protection and little warning for those in its way.

**Fig 1.03**

*Urban life posed many dangers in the late 19th and early 20th century. This grade crossing was at State Street in Schenectady before bridges were built and tracks raised above the streets.*

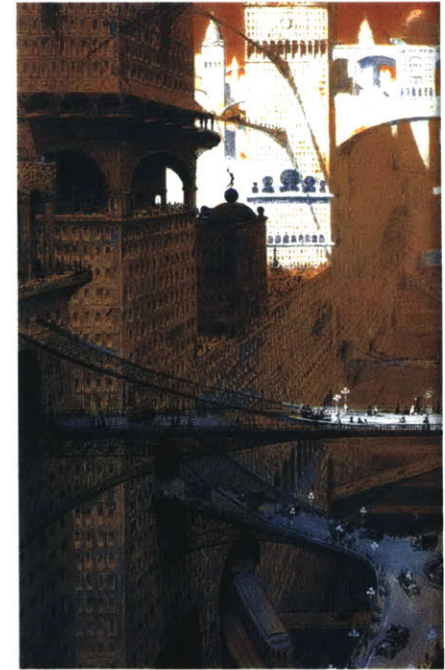


## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Order and safety in larger cities, many thought, could be obtained through greater vertical separation of transportation modes. Visionaries imagined skyscrapers with elevated trains running through them at one level, automobile traffic on another, and pedestrian traffic on another—often with small planes close overhead. Despite the lack of grounding in reality of these projections, many larger cities did in fact begin to operate on a number of levels, with subways, surface streets and highways, as well as elevated transportation networks for cars and trains. But for the smaller cities, verticality was not something their budgets would allow them to aspire to—and their problems continued to spread.

By the 1920s, the industrial revolution was in high gear and cities were filled with belching factories, increasingly congested streets, and other urban afflictions that only strengthened the resolve of many to leave town at the first opportunity. Between the deplorable condition and confusion of the downtown streets, and the uncoordinated and often frequently unreliable streetcar service, the public was ripe for an alternative form of transportation, and in particular, a private one—the automobile. The Ford Motor Company offered Model T's at a price average people could afford; by the time the last one rolled off the assembly line in the late 1920s, Henry Ford had seated about 15 million Americans behind the wheel. General Motors, Standard Oil, and Firestone Tire and Rubber were also working overtime to cure the city of the ills caused by streetcar traffic and transform peoples' commuting habits to cars. These companies formed a number of holding companies and subsidiaries that essentially bought up streetcar lines and ran the service and ridership into the ground, until their demise was a foregone conclusion. GM and others then sold the cities buses—which naturally needed tires and fuel to run. The drop in public transportation ridership that ensued also helped Detroit sell more cars to an insatiably auto-hungry public.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fast-growing (and already high) number of private automobile owners, Americans were dependent on the federal government to supply them with roads to fuel their growing driving habits. Until that was accomplished, driving would remain more of a recreational than an occupational necessity for most Americans. Thanks in part to numerous Road and Highway Acts which helped build nearly 500,000 miles of highways in the 1950s, and a generously funded and federally backed mortgage guarantee program



**Fig 1.04**

*Envisioning what the future of cities might be like often involved transportation networks weaving through buildings and occurring at every level.*



**Fig 1.05**

*The rising popularity of automobiles and federally backed mortgages allowed for the outward migration of people and jobs that emptied many downtowns and city centers.*

that favored suburban construction to city rebuilding, commuting by car would soon become an inevitability for many Americans. Almost overnight, a new economy was born—building automobiles, highway systems, shopping malls, and cul-de-sac filled developments of look-alike homes, complete with attached garages to house the newest members of the American family.

For a while, it seemed as if the downtown and city core had been abandoned—in body, mind, and spirit. Eventually the federal government responded to the decay and disinvestment that was occurring in the cities and offered to assist them in removing much of their substandard urban core and replacing it with a more suburban standard. Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, which became known as the federal urban renewal program, promised to remove blight and eliminate slums. By combining these efforts with local road widening projects and highway building through and around cities, it was thought that the decay would be arrested, the core rebuilt, traffic congestion solved, and access to the cities and downtown improved.

In truth, the result was not as glorious as the planners or promoters of these big government programs had hoped for or promised to the cities. In most cases, despite the fact that the intention of the program had been to improve housing conditions, urban renewal programs only seemed to add to or shift the decay. The road widening projects in the cities, rather than decreasing the congestion, typically resulted in adding volume and increasing congestion. In the end, the highways that were supposed to provide easier access to the cities only seemed to provide an easier escape from them. However, programs such as urban renewal were completely voluntary; the federal government was only the financier of these schemes in which many cities opted to participate. With federal money, cities set about to remove blight, or cause it and then remove it, acquire entire neighborhoods of homes, relocate the people and raze the structures (although not always in that order). Finally, the authorities assembled the land for transfer to private developers, whose improvements it was hoped, would increase the taxable value of the land. Not all cities were fortunate enough to take part in this process. But Schenectady was, and did.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

For cities and their downtowns, the suburban migration of people, jobs, and stores was a devastating blow and a particularly perplexing problem to solve. Starting in 1950, with the inauguration of an open air mall called Northgate, just outside of Seattle, downtown's problems began to multiply.<sup>7</sup> Soon these new strip malls were sprouting like crabgrass all along formerly undeveloped rural roads. Cities began to deal with this new unsightly shopping paradigm the only way they knew how—by defiling their own downtowns. Department stores and retailers on the city's Main Streets painted, covered over, and hacked off any detail that hinted at the buildings' antiquity or architectural reality. Even upper floors and windows were masked, disguising the fact that anyone used to live there and ensuring that no one ever would. With limited resources and in short order, cities all over managed to transform their downtowns into a collection of nondescript, generic boxes—effectively matching the character of the new shopping centers. Still, more shoppers were choosing the faceless shopping strip over the newly façadamized downtown. Pressured by merchants and downtown business associations, cities began to remove their downtown to build more parking.

Politicians and planners carefully considered what was happening on the retail front and began to find ways to milk the urban renewal cash cow. They envisioned big new developments and shopping centers adjacent to or in many cases, in the center of downtown. Urban renewal began to be “regarded as a program for tax-hungry city officials, downtown business interests and their hirelings in big planning and architectural firms...”<sup>8</sup> Some of the really bold plans proposed leveling and rebuilding the downtown. Typically the designs considered were based on the new iconography of suburban retail success—single-use, one story, flat-roofed buildings surrounding acres of parking. This added parking capacity, the planners thought, would benefit the existing retailers by helping them to retain their current customer base and allowing them to capitalize on the swarm of expected shoppers who would be driving to the new downtown. This new vision and new way of thinking about the downtown was the urban response to suburbia. In *Downtown Inc.: How America Rebuilds Cities*, authors Bernard Frieden and Lynne Sagalyn explain that during the frenetic race to rebuild cities in the 1950s, “Tight alliances of mayors, corporate executives, and civic leaders wielded money, power, and media access to get construction projects going.” The leading



**Fig 1.06**

*The rush to cover over anything that hinted at the age of downtown buildings led to a loss of identity in many cities and made upper floors unlivable.*





**Fig 1.07**

*A common scene in Schenectady starting with urban renewal in the 1950s—old buildings making way for new development. Here the crowd watches Kresge's Department Store making way for the city's new civic center and ice rink.*

minds behind this new vision came together for a national conference to commiserate about the problems of cities and to strengthen their resolve on how to deal with this changing world. The authors go on to describe the findings of this new collective mindset:

*To replace the obsolete city with this new vision would mean tearing down much of what was there. There was little talk of preserving historic buildings or keeping the traditional character of the city center. In order to save downtown, it was going to be necessary to destroy it. Since streets could not be replaced without the knocking down the buildings that lined them, speakers argued that a complete remedy would be possible only through the redevelopment of the entire area. Clearing the downtown would not be enough; neighborhoods surrounding the downtown were also obsolete. 'The task,' according to these authorities, was 'renovating entire neighborhoods to provide a completely new land-use pattern.'*<sup>9</sup>

By the time the Urban Renewal program died in 1974, most experts on urban affairs agreed that the program had been a failure.<sup>10</sup> Whether it was the application or the design of the program is still up for debate. In any case, after spending billion of dollars, displacing millions of people, and destroying thousands of viable neighborhoods, cities were left with a number of long-lasting scars—including vast tracts of land that had been cleared and were still awaiting redevelopment. Speaking to Congress in praise of the program in 1961, President Kennedy said, "Our communities are what we make them. We as a Nation have before us have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to remold our cities, to improve our patterns of community development, and to provide housing for all the segments of our society."<sup>11</sup> By the 1970s, it was clear that despite the best intentions, our cities were hurting, our downtowns were vacant, and many of our neighborhoods were a disgrace. Our communities were what we had made them and for the most part, we had made them worse. Despite the influx of federal funds starting in the early 1950s, cities remained unprepared and ill-advised as to what to do about the next wave of suburban retail expansion.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

By 1956, a new suburban retailing model had been born, and quickly began to impact the already dying downtown.<sup>12</sup> A reverse of the prototypical shopping plaza—with its large parking lot surrounded by individual shops and protected by a continuous awning—the new model offered a totally enclosed, climate controlled, Musak-playing, psuedo biospherical wonderland, surrounded on all four sides with acre upon acre of glorious blacktop. Inside was a prototype of Main Street, brimming with plastic trees, antique lighting, and fountains—where you could throw away even more money while wishing you were some place real. The irony of this was probably lost on the millions who had fled the cities, and now had to drive everywhere, even to these malls that were as disconnected from reality as was most everything else in suburbia. Once inside, however, they could enjoy an exclusively pedestrian experience, and as James Kunstler points out, not “have to look at all the goddamn cars and be reminded of what a depressing environment they lived in.”<sup>13</sup>

The response by a number of cities was swift and predictable, considering their already impressive resumes of bad decisions. They began to mull over the prospects, and then set about to mall over their downtown. This was accomplished by either roofing over entire sections of the downtown, building malls to fill in the vacant land created through urban renewal, or connecting and turning their buildings inward, so that people could have that artificial, protected mall environment. And in some cases, such as Scranton, Pennsylvania, cities imploded entire blocks of the downtown to make way for new malls. Most of these solutions lacked even the basic amenities that the suburban malls provided and in their quest for mediocrity, these cities had destroyed the characteristics of a good downtown. Even when the in-town malls were busy, they usually managed to remove more people from the streets than they added.

By the mid-1980s, another role reversal was underway. More and more downtowns were discovering something new—themselves. They learned that they were not shopping plazas, strip malls, or indoor shopping malls, and they were glad. Underneath the “updated” façades they found rich architectural details, a composition and articulation of building materials, windows, and doors that gave rhythm to the street, and a collection of buildings that added to the character and uniqueness of the place. As these cities uncovered



**Fig 1.08**

*In the 1950s downtowns tried to hide their identity...*



**Fig 1.09**

*...in the 1980s they begin to rediscover and uncover it.*

## Chapter 1: Downtown Growth and Decline

the upper windows, they found that these old buildings could support new life. On the ground floor, new shops began to occupy old spaces. People began to come downtown to live, work, shop, play, or just to watch or be watched. As this happened, these cities learned something Jane Jacobs had been trying to teach for over 25 years—that “deadness and monotony repel life” but “liveliness and variety attract life.”

These were not all stories of big plans, expensive government programs, or overnight transformations. They were, however, stories of groups and individuals doing small things that had a powerful collective effect. Like the “cancer” of blight that cities had so worried would spread, the new exuberance and life, it turned out, was also contagious. Starting with one storeowner, one landlord, one building, ideas caught on. Flowers were planted, sidewalks swept, windows washed, details highlighted and the rich stories were rediscovered and added to. These were not destined to become stories of the past, but rather stories of people in the present who respected and utilized the past, added to it, and would pass something of value on to the future.

### Conclusion

Although theories and explanations about the rise and fall American cities continue to be advanced, there are none that fit every case exactly. There are, however, common problems that a number of cities have faced, especially in the past 100 years. Perhaps a clearer distinction can be drawn on the basis of how they have dealt with the problems they faced. Many cities went about trying to answer to the suburban malls by trying to look, although not necessarily act just like them. Other cities continued to build on the characteristics that differentiated their downtown from the malls. And while the automobile remains the scapegoat for many who are trying to point out the problems of a city, there have been extremes in the way cities have dealt with cars as well. As early as 1920, Los Angeles had decided that automobiles were the scourge of the downtown, and banned them from parking there entirely. The effects on the businesses were disastrous and the parking ban was soon lifted.<sup>14</sup> In other cities, the roads were given over almost entirely to the automobile, at the expense of the pedestrian and other forms of street life. In the 1970s and 1980s, cities again tried banning cars from the street. And again, it didn't work.



## Schenectady's Downtown Story

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*Schenectady*  
*Settled by Van Curler 1661*  
*Burned by French and Indians*  
*February 8, 1690*

Historical markers that inform us of an event, *Washington Slept Here*, or explain what once occupied a site, *Pennsylvania Station (1910-1963)*, are one way to tell a story about the past. Another method is through the physical evidence of the past that remains. A city can be read through the building styles, settlement patterns, and the materials used in construction. The fabric which remains gives us a window into the past, and helps us understand a city's people, its industry, its economic cycle, or even how it was affected by outside events. When there is no remaining physical record of the past, we are limited to written accounts, photographs, maps, an active imagination, or historical markers, such as the one above, located at the entrance to Schenectady where the main commercial street meets the Mohawk River.

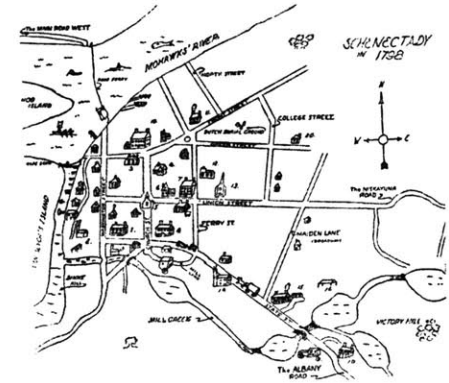
In 1642, the Dutch tradesman Arent Van Curler traveling along the Mohawk River spotted what he later described in a letter to his brother as "...the most beautiful land that the eye of man ever beheld."<sup>1</sup> He bought the land from the Mohawks, which included the *Grotte Vlucht* (great flats) and *bouwlandt* (farm land). Much of the low-lying "rich alluvial plain" along the Mohawk River and Binnekil was subject to flooding, but did "provide the foodstuffs needed to sustain the settlers and their livestock. Lots also were divided and assigned within a stockade that was built to ensure more adequate protection against possible incursions by unfriendly Frenchmen or Indians from the north."<sup>2</sup> But on the night of February 8, 1690, while the residents were asleep, a party of Frenchmen, Sault and Algonquin Indians slipped into the unguarded north gate and killed 65 of the men, women, and children and burned most of the homes

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

within the settlement.<sup>3</sup> Today the original Grotte Vlucht area is mostly occupied by the General Electric Company. The original stockade area has remained primarily a residential section and is home to the city's first National Historic District, an impressive collection of 18th and 19th century buildings. The north and south gates of the stockade were uncovered in 1972 by a utility company doing excavation.

Many of the early streets of the city were laid out perpendicular and parallel to the Mohawk River and the Binnecill. But because of the twists and turns of the river, almost none of the streets in the city run in a north-south or east-west direction. Adding to the confusion for many, the Mohawk, which is generally thought of as a river with an east-west orientation, approaches the city from the northeast. Near Schenectady it is separated by a number of small islands. At the point where the Binnecill meets Washington Avenue, it turns sharply north. North of Union Street, it rejoins the Mohawk where the river turns again and flows in a north-easterly direction. Each one of these turns in the River has affected the grid of the city. For Schenectadians, it makes it difficult to know if they are going north or south, or if they are on the east or west side of the street. Few people use compass directions and are more likely to refer to going right or left, or going up or down the street or downtown or uptown. The downtown is actually located to the north of most of the city, but sits at the foot of the valley and lower than the rest of the city. So despite the fact that downtown is northerly for most of the residents, it occupies an area of the lowlands of the city and the Mohawk Valley.

After the massacre Schenectady was rebuilt and gradually grew from a little settlement into a small town. By the time it was chartered in 1798, the population of the city had grown to around 3,000 and its first college had been chartered three years earlier. People worked mainly as farmers, traders, merchants, or in the local mills, which were integral to the agricultural economy. For most of the early 1800s, residential development continued within the stockade and along the spine of State Street, which would eventually develop into the city's "downtown" and main shopping street. The growth and success of the city over the next 120 years was, for the most part, a combination of luck and location.



**Fig 2.01**

*Schenectady's early settlement along the Mohawk River and Binnecill around 1798.*



**Fig 2.02**

*Early view along the Erie Canal on what is now Erie Boulevard. View looking east towards the Union Street Bridge.*



**Fig 2.03**

*The passenger platform for one of Schenectady's earlier train stations.*

### Roads, Rails, and Ditches

Schenectady's location played a major role in the three major transportation networks and systems that passed through the city in the early 1800s. The first was made possible in 1800 when the New York State Legislature passed the Turnpike Law allowing "private companies to build, maintain, and supervise turnpikes that would replace the stagecoach or wagon routes between cities of the state."<sup>4</sup> In 1808, a bridge was built across the Mohawk River as part of a turnpike and toll road that extended to Rome, New York. Soon after that, the Albany Turnpike was completed, linking Albany with points west via Schenectady. These turnpikes, although quite simple, were an improvement over earlier roads which were often washed out and filled with ruts, offering a ride that was typically slow and rough. Excavation for the second major transportation system that would pass through Schenectady started in 1817, and was known as "Clinton's Ditch" for the sitting governor. By 1825, the 363 mile-long Erie Canal was completed, running through Schenectady along the eastern edge of the Mohawk River on what is now Erie Boulevard. Six years later in 1831, Schenectady's third major transportation system, the railroad, came through the city.<sup>5</sup> Like many of the early railroads, it followed the route of the canals, which had followed those of the rivers.

It is difficult to assess the exact impact that each of these early transportation systems had on the growth of the downtown. However, an examination of the build-up of commercial and residential structures during the time of each of the new systems provides some indication. Given the turnpike's route, which went directly along State Street in what is now considered the downtown, it is likely that travelers and shippers passing through that area frequented the stores or other businesses, expanding the customer base for the early merchants beyond the pedestrian city. In fact, as City Historian Larry Hart explains, "Inns and tavern sprang up all along the stage coach routes for the accommodations of hungry, thirsty, or tired travelers."<sup>6</sup> Another physical indication of growth during that period and the turnpike's effect on the downtown is the number of houses still remaining that were built in the Federal Style, the dominant housing type from 1780-1820. This of course does not take into account all those that have been replaced due to later intense development pressure, turned into parking lots, or modified beyond recognition.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

The impact of the Erie Canal on the downtown is much more observable, both in terms of the types of buildings left in its wake, and the physical nature of the streets that have replaced it. The canal, which included a tow path along one side, was filled in and paved over in 1925, becoming Erie Boulevard. Along the lower section (west of State Street), the tow path, canal, and adjacent Dock Street together have left lower Erie Boulevard extremely wide. The buildings along the canal were a combination of wood and masonry warehouses and granaries. The late date at which the canal was filled in caused many of the properties along it to miss the construction boom of the preceding 20 years. Although a number of buildings were constructed after that period, their scale has more in common with the smaller warehouses than that of the street. Today the buildings and street, especially south of State Street, remain out of scale with one another, and most of Erie Boulevard appears underdeveloped. The canal and the warehouse environment kept most residential development from occurring along that route, and preserved it for later industrial uses.

Although the Erie Canal undoubtedly promoted growth of the downtown and surrounding residential area, there are relatively few Greek Revival structures found in comparison with many other canal towns of this period. It may be that much of the housing of that period was lost due to subsequent development pressure. It may also indicate that the city experienced less growth and development as a result of the canal than other towns. Or perhaps, the canal provided a means for those who could afford it to locate farther outside the city.

With the advent of the railroads, Schenectady was opening up to more possibilities and people. The downtown continued to prosper and grow, and the city's small but developing manufacturing base was being exposed to a much larger market. The character of the "upper" section of State Street, the area east of Erie Canal and the railroad tracks, was rapidly becoming as much of a commercial center as the "lower" section of State Street, the area west of the Erie Canal and east of the Mohawk River. By the late 1800s, the transformation of the upper part of State Street to an exclusively commercial character was almost complete, with a few residential structures still remaining near the base of Crescent Park. These changes



**Fig 2.04**

*The wide expanse of Erie Boulevard along what was the Canal, tow path and Dock Street.*



**Fig 2.05**

*An early example of Greek Revival architecture in Schenectady.*



## Chapter 2: Schenectady's Downtown Story



**Fig 2.06**  
*Early example of Gothic Revival style of domestic architecture in Schenectady.*

did not occur as quickly or as early as they did in cities like New York, and despite the commercial growth, many of the newer buildings continued to house people in the upper floors.

Through the 1880s, development pressures were much less intense than those occurring in the bigger cities, which in many ways, helped Schenectady's downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods remain more livable. Although the railroad would have made it quite possible, there was little out-migration of people from the city seeking the sylvan environs espoused by Thomas Cole or the Gothic Revival abodes portrayed by Andrew Jackson Downing. There is, however, some evidence of housing from that time period located in a number of the outlying pastoral settings around Schenectady, suggesting that a few citizens with the means may have found escape from city life in the nearby countryside. Within the city, there are few extant houses built in the Gothic Revival style, which persisted from 1840-1880. The majority of the houses remaining from that period are more characteristically Italianate in style. This style, which was also prominent from 1840-1880, was more suitable to the smaller lots of an urban area, and did not require the natural setting that the Gothic Revival was at home in.



**Fig 2.07**  
*View of the American Locomotive Company along the Mohawk River.*

Although the arrival of the railroad played an important role in the growth and development of the city, more important was the role the city played in the growth and development of the railroad. In 1848, Schenectady Locomotive Works was born, and although it grew slowly and faltered at first, by 1901 it had merged with several other companies to become the American Locomotive Company, or ALCO as it was commonly referred to. By the time it closed its doors in 1969 and the last engine moved out, it had played a major role in the growth and industry of the city as well as the shipping and transportation of the country. Its presence has had a lasting impact on the downtown. The main plant for ALCO, or "The Works" as it was called in the earlier days, was located along the Erie Canal and the Mohawk River, about a half a mile northeast of State Street. Its location prevented any further expansion of the residential area of the Stockade, or any chance for connecting the city with the river along that stretch.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Residential growth during the early part of the ALCO era can be seen in the scattering of Italianate and Second Empire structures that were erected in and around the downtown. John Ellis, the founder of American Locomotive, built a large Second Empire mansion up on the hill of Nott Terrace, where from his cupola, he may have had a view of *The Works* down below. A number of other houses built during this period lined both sides of Nott Terrace—stretching from Nott Street to State Street. Most of these were leveled in the 1950s and 60s as a result of major urban renewal projects.

One of the most fortuitous developments for the city actually started as a misfortune for the Schenectady Locomotive Works. A disagreement between managers caused one of them to leave—determined to start his own company. He began construction on two large buildings located along the great flats, but his funding fell through and neither building was completed. Soon after, Thomas Edison arrived in Schenectady by train in search of a new manufacturing location away from the labor disputes and other problems of New York City. He sighted the two buildings that had been the outgrowth of the disagreement, and found them to be quite suitable. Here he decided to build the main plant that was to become the General Electric Company. For many in Schenectady, this is the beginning of the story of the city—the awakening of the “sleepy canal town” as some writers have described it.



**Fig 2.08**

*Second Empire mansion of John Ellis, President of Schenectady Locomotive Works. Now a rectory for Saint John the Evangelist Church.*

**Fig 2.09**

*The sprawling operations of the General Electric Company along the River.*



## Chapter 2: Schenectady's Downtown Story



**Fig 2.10**

*Symbol of Schenectady's early industrial power and importance.*

In 1886, before Edison arrived the population of the city was under 13,000 and had only grown by about 3,000 in the 19 years prior. By 1910, the population of Schenectady numbered almost 73,000—14,000 more than it is today. (Which is about 700,000 less than the city's 1924 plan had projected by the year 2000!) By 1930, the city had reached its peak of about 95,700 residents. Because of the dominance by both American Locomotive and General Electric, many referred to Schenectady as “The City That Lights and Hauls the World.” This explosive growth, coupled with the many homes and commercial buildings built during this period, gave the city many characteristics typical of a boom town. The majority of the existing housing stock dates from the first 30 years of the 20th century. Most of the commercial buildings in the downtown are about 70 to 110 years old. Many in the city see this as an obstacle to progress, a sign that the city that is filled with old, deteriorated, and obsolete buildings. Other see it as an opportunity for enhancement, a chance to build on the stock of historic buildings that contribute to the character of the downtown and neighborhoods of the city.

By 1940, the population of the city had shrunk by about 8,000 to 87,500—marking a downward trend which continues today. Despite the downturn in population, the downtown remained busy, with little room for expansion. The chamber of commerce responded in 1947 with a grand vision for the city and its downtown. It was a time of tomorrow and the impressive plan suggested a futuristic city center that would help erase the image of the old industrial town and provide room for the downtown to grow. Over the next 20 years or more, guided by the 1947 vision and a 1948 plan, and assisted by the state and federal government subsidies, the city set out to rid the area around downtown from blight and replace it with something much less congested and much more suburban. Along State Street and other commercial streets in the downtown, merchants began to “update” the façades of their buildings to keep pace with the new look of the suburban prototype.

The old, outdated streetcars made their last run in 1946, and were replaced with buses until the company folded in 1951. By 1952, the worn cobblestone roadway and rusting tracks had been removed and replaced with a fresh carpet of black macadam for the comfort of the automobiles, which would own the

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

road until the buses returned, mostly empty, in 1970. With the streetcars gone, everyone coming downtown would need a place to park. More commercial buildings and large tracts of residential housing were bulldozed to make way for parking lots, suburban department stores, and acres of empty promises.

By the time the 1960s came to a close, so did most of the downtown theaters. Soon after the new decade began, department stores began folding, buildings tumbled, and parking lots continued to spawn, while shoppers kept shopping—at the malls. The city’s backwards “Field of Dreams” had not worked. And so the city began to build. They embarked upon ambitious projects on opposite sides of the street. On one side, they connected an entire block of buildings from within so that customers could avoid the harsh realities of the street. A canal, that often acted as a moat, was dug around part of the mall, both to remind people of the local heritage and to help them forget where they were. Unfortunately it leaked into the basements, became a liability, and was unceremoniously filled in like the previous canal. On the other side of the street, water was also the main attraction. It was supposed to be filled with skaters, families, and weekly events. But almost before the paint was dry both projects were in the red. At the rink, the weekly events happened yearly, the ice turned to turf, and families traded skates for soccer cleats. Neither project was built to the standards promised and neither performed as expected. Despite the evocative names that brought to mind visions of a city center, a canal, and a square—together the project only seemed to create a larger hole in the downtown. Schenectady’s Canal Square and Center City had failed to revive State Street or bring the shoppers back.

By the mid-1980s, the merchants located along State Street and Jay Street were suffering. In response to their plight, the city began two parallel, or perhaps more appropriately perpendicular projects. Less substantial than those of the late 1970s, one project was somewhat effective, the other mostly destructive. Traffic was diverted from one block of Jay Street, trees and lights added, and pedestrian traffic encouraged. Despite the long history of failed pedestrian malls, this one worked, in short, because of its length. Along State Street, empty sidewalks were widened to relieve the congestion, benches added, and not much was encouraged. Along the road, traffic was encouraged, parking discouraged, and shoppers



**Fig 2.11**  
*Trolley tracks being installed along State Street near Broadway in Schenectady.*

## Chapter 2: Schenectady's Downtown Story



**Fig 2.12**

*The new look of State Street after trolley tracks had been removed and new pavement put down.*

eliminated. And just like in Los Angeles and all of other cities that have tried removing parking from the street, it only served to deter business.

Since the mid-1980s, Schenectady has struggled to turn around the fortunes of the downtown. While not all the storefronts are empty, they contain largely a mix of social services, accountants, lawyers, and a number of other uses that are hardly guaranteed magnets for downtown shoppers. A number of streetscape projects were completed largely through volunteer efforts to help beautify the downtown and ready it for the new millennium. The city, for its part, has been unable to put together a street-level approach to retain or attract small businesses. The buildings lining the downtown street continue to deteriorate, making them easy targets for demolition. And although new buildings are being planned, the vacancy rate for existing ones remains high. At the same time, salvageable buildings are becoming landfill while vacant land remains waiting nearby.

Schenectady's downtown is at a point where many people feel it can go nowhere but up. But it has been at that point before, and somehow went lower. The city must begin to understand what a good downtown is before it can build one. It must begin to understand the downtown's importance to the city, surrounding towns, and the region at large. It must understand where it has gone wrong in the past, so it can avoid costly mistakes in the future. It must know where it was, where it is, and where it wants to go, before it can get there.



## Character, Image, and Other Reasons Downtown is Important

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*Downtown symbolizes the city for Americans. It is the image by which a city measures its progress and projects to visitors. ...bustling crowds and traffic congestion convey its vitality and excitement...older [rundown] buildings and vacant lots reflect the flight to the suburbs...an American city does not consider itself successful without a magnificent downtown.*

**Edward Muller, *Distinctively Downtown***

The image many of us hold of a city is closely linked to that of its downtown. When we observe a failing downtown, we invariably, and too often correctly, assume it to be a failing city as well. A downtown filled with empty storefronts and streets that appear lifeless implies a city filled with despair and devoid of hope. In contrast, a downtown exhibiting variety and vitality tends to stand for a city that is equally spirited. The downtown can also have a powerful effect on the rest of the city—positively or negatively influencing such things as real estate values, people’s attitudes towards the city, and the city’s ability to retain or attract investment. In many ways the downtown plays a crucial role in improving the livability of the city by providing civic, residential, economic, and cultural opportunities that may not be found in the outlying suburbs or nearby towns. The downtown should be thought of as the heart and soul of the community and a shared asset for residents and visitors alike. In paraphrasing Jim Kunstler comments on city parks, it might be said, *Good downtowns belong to everyone, while bad ones belong to no one.*

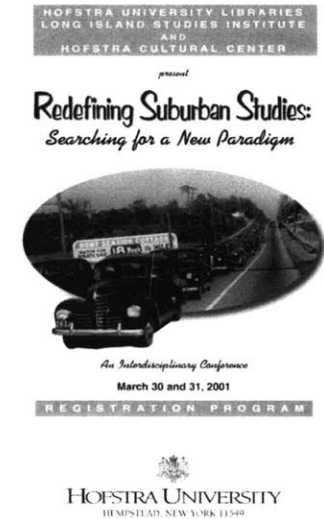
### **The Identity Crisis of Placeless Spaces**

To appreciate further the importance of a downtown and the sense of identity and central focus it provides, it is worth considering the ongoing discourse about placeless towns and auto-dependent suburbs in

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

the graduate schools and professional firms engaged in issues of city planning and urban design. One of the vital questions being discussed is: How can places that have grown up around the automobile and large-scale, single-use developments be redesigned to create a sense of place, identity, and focus—thereby increasing their livability? The idea is, in part, to create a place-based rather than name-based identity—one that encourages rather than prohibits a variety of people and uses from coming together. For some, this may imply creating something more similar to the traditional Main Street than the shopping mall to give the community a sense of ownership and place to call home. For most, it means creating some place of lasting character and value, a place that people care about and care to be in—one that is worth building on rather than constantly rebuilding.

Many suburbs and sprawling towns have begun to consider their individual identity crisis and lack of center by defining new focal points or developing new areas of mixed use and activity that give their residents some sense of shared ownership. Modifying the town square concept, some suburbs have created community cul-de-sacs that combine civic buildings (i.e., the town hall, post office, or library) with retail shops and professional offices. By locating these buildings within largely retail and commercial developments, they have at least begun to understand the importance of mixed-use areas (although not yet mixed-use buildings) and started to address the idea of shared public space. But often, these attempts show no understanding of what makes a memorable or lively public space. A vinyl-sided town hall capped with a poorly proportioned cupola and despoiled with phony out-of-scale Palladian windows, plastic corner quoins, pre-molded broken scroll pediments, and other tacked on historical or architectural references, hardly conveys a building of permanence and lasting presence (other than the half-life of the building's materials). Buildings such as this add little to the character of the place or the seriousness of the attempt. The addition of a gazebo, antique street lighting, or public benches nearby does little to improve the situation, especially if the location of such a center requires that everyone access it by car. Town centers that are not close enough to a vibrant residential community often fail to create any activity on the streets other than increased vehicular traffic.



**Fig 3.01**

*A brochure for a conference at Hofstra University on a growing area of study—Redefining the Suburbs.*



## Chapter 3: Downtown's Importance

Some communities have also experimented with the idea of locating a number of town functions and offices within local shopping malls. Part of the reasoning behind this may be to build off the identity of the shopping mall, and perhaps create something of a town within a mall. Another possible motive might be to provide a more convenient way for community members to access municipal services and departments within a space that is already being heavily used by its community members. The fundamental problem with this is that it removes public services from the public realm. In *The Geography of Nowhere*, James Kunstler points out that a mall isn't really a public space at all. It is a "private space masquerading as a public space." When civic uses are contained within private buildings, any sense of shared public space or community ownership goes out the window. Whether towns and suburbs want to create public squares, a new Main Street, or even develop a new design typology, they should ensure that access to municipal services remains convenient and truly public.

### The Name Game

A number of suburbs have abdicated their responsibility and handed over the task of engendering any sense of the public realm to private developers. But for many developers, their experience is more relevant to place calling than place making. For some developers, borrowing from the urban and small town lexicon to create shopping areas whose names bring to mind some great civic vision, is the extent of their working within the public realm. Even the word *mall*, once defined and thought of as "a public area often set with shade trees and designed as a promenade or as a pedestrian walk," has become as debased as the places it now represents.<sup>2</sup> Developers have also resorted to using words such as common, square, or plaza to increase the palatability of the insipid private worlds they have created and to imply a sense of community and shared ownership. Others have even gone so far as to attach names which are part of the local heritage to give places something of an instant history.

Using that approach, even in towns with no real center or image, developers have created spaces that have only a verbal sense of place. Near Schenectady, in the town of Colonie where there is no real town center, developers in the 1970s created Colonie Center, a large shopping mall. In the town of Niskayuna, with no

## **Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place**

real Main Street or town square, developers have used the name Niskayuna Commons for their shopping plaza. And in nearby Latham, the name of a new sprawling big-box development is used to preserve the memory of what it once was, Latham Farms. Few developers, however, have used names that more closely approximate the real image or purpose of the place that they have created, such as Shoppers World, or Shoporama. With that kind of honesty, we would invariably have to drive by places with names such as Parking Heaven and places like Latham Farms might now be more appropriately referred to as Asphalt Acres. Perhaps the reality of those names would be harder for people to deal with than the reality of those places.

Despite the name games that mall developers play and the more recent attempts to incorporate other traditionally downtown, non-retail functions, malls cannot be a downtown or Main Street. But neither can downtown be expected to replace the big malls anytime soon. The lesson that cities should take from all of this is that communities and developers all around them are trying to replicate the characteristics that are inherent, but often taken for granted, in distinctive and healthy downtowns. By recognizing the potential of their own downtown and building on it as an asset, cities such as Schenectady can position themselves to capitalize on their uniqueness and heritage—offering something to the area that none of the malls, outlying shopping districts, or newer communities will be able to match.

### **Learning From Las Vegas, Again**

In 1972, Robert Venturi's, *Learning From Las Vegas*, challenged architects and other experts "to question more closely how we look at things."<sup>3</sup> It was written at a time when the roadside architecture and the signage of Las Vegas were under attack as a vulgar and crass form of vandalism. The renowned architectural critic wondered what would be left after the design commissions and review boards were done "beautifying" the strip with classical fountains, unified design standards, and trees—obscuring all signs of the "visual pollution" that acted as a didactic symbol of the city. Few at the time understood the iconographic quality that the signs and buildings, as a collection, added to the character and meaning of the place or their impact as a uniquely Las Vegas trademark. Because of Venturi's provocative work, however, those



**Fig 3.02**

*The character of the Las Vegas strip, a unique example of the character defining qualities of a place.*

landmarks were transformed—at least in many people’s minds—from profane erections to commercialism into sacred symbols of time and place. Although a number of places have learned from Las Vegas and begun to respect not just their high-style landmarks but their less-than perfect vernacular, Las Vegas in many ways has not yet learned from itself.

On the night of October 27, 1993, before hundreds of thousands of onlookers, the old and famous Dunes resort was detonated with great fanfare and pyrotechnic precision to make way for the new. “Most longtime Las Vegas observers mark the event as the symbolic end of the old Las Vegas and the ushering-in of the new, featuring large family-oriented theme resorts.”<sup>4</sup> It also signaled an end to Las Vegas’s being unique because of itself, and its transition into a city that is becoming “unique” because of its collection of everywhere else. Visitors to Las Vegas can now go from Treasure Island to the Egyptian Pyramids, from Monte Carlo to New York or even Paris without ever leaving Las Vegas. In fact you could spend days in Las Vegas without ever feeling like you’ve been there. The problem with Las Vegas is not quite as some have said about some cities, “that there is no there, there” but instead there is just too much everywhere else there.

Meanwhile, the downtown of Las Vegas has continued its slide into obscurity. Despite a public-private partnership which spent \$70 million on the “Fremont Experience” in 1996, “intended to help revitalize the flagging fortunes of downtown Las Vegas...”<sup>5</sup> Mayor Oscar Goodman recently announced plans to build a downtown—apparently forgetting that they already had one. One observer described Las Vegas as a “postmodern urban nexus surrounded by golfing greens but devoid of a center...”<sup>6</sup> But as a developer pointed out, “Las Vegas is now large and sophisticated enough that it demands a focal point.” The real residents of the city, another developer explained “are hungry for a core, a center, a communal place where they can come together.”<sup>7</sup> Does this mean that the City of Sin wants to find its soul? Probably not. The proposals to date include few ideas that would help create any place of genuine community. They are largely big development proposals aimed at attracting even more tourists and seem to offer little if anything for current residents. But as the Mayor stood on the edge of a vast tract of land to be redeveloped,

## **Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place**

he excitedly exclaimed, “We’re going to have a city,” perhaps implying that despite its explosive growth, without a real vibrant downtown, Las Vegas is not yet a real city.

### **Low Rents and High Hopes**

Because a downtown is built up over time, it is typically a mix of buildings—old and new, restored and run-down, large and small, convenient and inconvenient—all providing opportunities that malls don’t provide. The rents of malls can be prohibitively expensive for all but very established businesses or nationwide chain stores. The range of buildings that typically make up a downtown create opportunities for start-up or entrepreneurial businesses that cannot afford the higher rents of a suburban shopping mall.<sup>8</sup> When national chain stores, established local specialty shops, or new entrepreneurial start-ups mix within a downtown, there are a number of potential benefits that each brings to the other. Each business may have a different customer base that typically would not have the opportunity to cross over when the businesses are located in the more homogenous environment of a shopping mall. A person who typically shops at a mall may come downtown to one of the chain stores that has a greater recognition, and in the process, discover local businesses that they would never find at a mall. And likewise, the customers of some of the local shops that typically don’t fit into the big mall plan might also help support some of the mall-type stores when they are located in the downtown. For many of the local businesses, there is an added cross benefit that they enjoy when they begin to do business with one another by purchasing products or services. Perhaps this is less likely to happen with larger national chain stores because they are typically controlled by regional headquarters and are supplied through large regional distribution centers. Overall, this rich mix of businesses and eclectic collection of spaces that a downtown can provide creates an opportunity for a quite different shopping experience and range of products than are offered in most malls.

This mix of buildings in various conditions and with differing rent structures in the downtown, coupled with a city’s other neighborhoods, also creates a greater range of residential opportunities than the suburbs can provide. In addition, it provides an opportunity for people who work in the downtown to live near their work, and perhaps be extricated from the bondage and expense of automobile ownership.



**Fig 3.03**  
*Lifeless parking lot in Schenectady.*



**Fig 3.04**  
*Ephemeral event giving life to an otherwise lifeless place.*

Given the overall cost of owning one, the savings from this could be quite substantial—a particular benefit for those in the lower income brackets. For college students and retirees, an auto-free lifestyle may not be just a good financial decision, but a necessity too. A downtown with good access to public transportation as well as educational, recreational, and cultural amenities becomes a more exciting place for more kinds of people to live. And the greater the range of people living in or around the downtown, the greater the range of services and opportunities that will be available. In turn, this reinforces the livability and adds to the richness of the downtown.

### A Different Kind of “Free Market”

The public nature of a downtown allows for a number of ephemeral events and markets to flourish there without the added expense of infrastructure improvements. It provides a space for less formal sectors of the economy, such as open-air markets, push carts and food truck vendors to operate virtually *rent-free*. This “free market” system and its temporary nature provides an opportunity (in the downtown) to provide a constantly changing scene and improve the variety of products that are offered. Roberta Gratz and Norman Mintz in *Cities Back From the Edge: New Life for Downtown* note that “Farmers’ markets are probably the most successful tool for the strengthening or regenerating of downtowns of any size, from the smallest Main Street to the most rubble-strewn inner-city commercial center.” These markets assist the small family farm—helping them to stay in business and preserving the rural nature of the outlying areas. At the same time these markets provide easy access to fresh produce for chefs at local restaurants, save downtown office workers time and money, and bring consumers and tourists dollars into the community. They offer something distinctively different from supermarkets and greatly add to the activity, visual variety, and life on the street.

Public rallies, celebrations, festivals and parades are among the many other ephemeral events that are only possible in truly public spaces. These events need the downtown as much as the downtown needs them. Schenectady’s Annual Christmas parade, billed as the Northeast’s largest nighttime Christmas parade (and without fail the coldest) would be logistically impossible to hold in even the largest of the area malls. So

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

would the many New Years' First Night celebrations, which use existing downtown infrastructure to bring people together with just the right mixture of performance, culinary, and fine arts, in an indoor-outdoor festive environment. The positive impact of ephemeral events on communities are much longer lasting than the events themselves. These events can also help to reinforce community traditions, bring families together, and instill a sense of civic pride. For well over 200 years the small Rhode Island town of Bristol has been celebrating the Fourth of July with the longest consecutively running Fourth of July parade in the country. The parade and the weeklong festivities attract people from all over, but more importantly it brings families and the community together. Family reunions are held that week and as the festivities pick up, business and regular activity in the town slow considerably. At the conclusion of the weeklong celebration, parade, and final night's fireworks, preparations begin for the next year's events. It is the type of event that would be hard to imagine in a centerless development or sprawling town that has no real character or identity.

### Environments of Opportunity

The density and efficiency of cities and their downtowns, when used effectively, help to retain the open space and rural characteristics of nearby communities. In the northeast, as in many areas of the country, while the population has been slowly increasing, or in many cases decreasing, the amount of land being developed has increased dramatically. This is true not just outside the cities, but within. Poor development decisions within communities often obliterate the few remaining areas of undeveloped land, even when there is an abundance of buildings and sites that could be adaptively reused. When cities and downtowns are able to offer more livable and exciting environments, they provide a viable alternative to the suburbs. As they do this, they will not only continue to grow as a regional cultural center, but they will also play a large part in improving the image and standards of the region. In the absence of regional cooperation or growth restrictions, livable cities and downtowns are one of the few ways that regions can reduce outward growth pressures and preserve more of the natural landscape of the outlying areas.



**Fig 3.05**

*Eisenhower addressing throngs of supporters near Union Station in Schenectady. A community's cultural memory now has lost its context.*

## Chapter 3: Downtown's Importance

### Conclusion

When a downtown is thought of in isolation apart from its city, it becomes an abstraction in much the same way as a building becomes less meaningful without some relation to its site, and other buildings or uses that border it. What happens in the downtown, affects the image and health of a city. Likewise, the city has a direct influence on the region. The downtown can therefore be seen to influence the retail, job, residential, cultural, and environmental conditions of their regions at large. Downtowns must therefore be appreciated as tremendous assets that require investments of time and money to prevent them from becoming a liability to the city or region.

Downtowns also represent a history of investment, and an infrastructure that would be impossible to replace. To consider the downtown as just a collection of obsolete buildings and an outdated way of life is nothing less than shortsighted. To constantly demolish and rebuild large sections of the downtown is typically an inefficient and often largely ineffective method for improving the image and character of a downtown. To recognize what makes a downtown a lively and interesting place is a start.





**Section II:**  
**Schenectady's Planning Background**



## Urban Renewal and Yesterday's "Town of Tomorrow"

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*Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a nobler, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with evergrowing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty.*

**Daniel H. Burnham**

When the *Plan of Chicago*, also known as "the Burnham Plan" was published in 1909, it not only set the stage for future development of Chicago, but "...established a pattern for American city planning."<sup>1</sup> Cities everywhere were experiencing extraordinary growth and beginning to realize that continued haphazard expansion would only impede their future success. The plans were often not as concerned with fixing the past as they were with building a new future. Indeed some felt, "It may or may not be possible to effect changes in the old city to make it more healthful and more efficient, but there can be no argument against planning a better city to cover the outlying areas that are now open fields."<sup>2</sup>

In 1947, Schenectady adopted a new plan, which involved not only future expansion but considered the redevelopment of large areas of the existing city along the edge of its Central Business District. During the next 20 years or more, with the help of federal and state programs, the city would drastically change the form of that area and its relationship to the rest of the downtown and the other residential neighborhoods that bordered it.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Schenectady's recognition of its growth and the need for planning started in 1912, when a group of citizens led by Charles P. Steinmetz, one of the city's most famous citizens, "engaged Dr. John Nolen of Cambridge, Massachusetts to prepare a plan for city improvement and extension." Although the report was never published or circulated, *Planning a City for the People* helped to improve the city's park system and sparked a "genuine interest on the part of the city in its own future welfare."<sup>3</sup> In 1923, with the city still in the midst of its most explosive growth period, Schenectady engaged one of the most prolific city planning firms of the time, Harland Bartholomew and Associates, to prepare a plan for the city's future. The *Schenectady Preliminary Report of the City Planning Commission* was delivered to the City in 1924.<sup>4</sup> Its emphasis was on issues such as streetcar line expansion, street widening, and the need for additional parks and playgrounds. The recommendations were based in part on future growth projections, although there was no indication as to how far into the future the recommendations reached. At the time, the population of the city was around 90,000 and "had not by any means stopped growing" as the report pointed out. A "conservative estimate" according to the report, allowed for a "uniform 25 percent increase every decade" and projected the population to be 171,000 by 1950 and 750,000 by the year 2000.<sup>5</sup>

Little of the 1924 plan was ever carried out. Street widening was an expensive and complicated process, and by the time Bartholomew and Associates was hired in 1946 to prepare another plan for the city, streetcars were on their way out. (The last streetcar left the city in the Summer of 1946 on the back of a flatbed truck, destined for Santiago, Chile.) And as reported by Bartholomew in 1948, people were also starting to leave the city. But despite the less euphoric projections in population growth—under 110,000 predicted in 1970 versus over 270,000 in the 1924 plan—road-widening recommendations continued. This was partly an outgrowth of the growing role of private transportation and the non-existent role of public transportation. It was also based on the assumption that despite the recent decline in the population, the city would still experience growth. But perhaps the most dramatic difference in the 1948 Plan was the recognition that its recommendations would need to be promoted if the plan was to be realized. "No plan," it was said in the report, "can be effective in promoting the welfare of the community if it does not have the support of the citizens."<sup>6</sup>

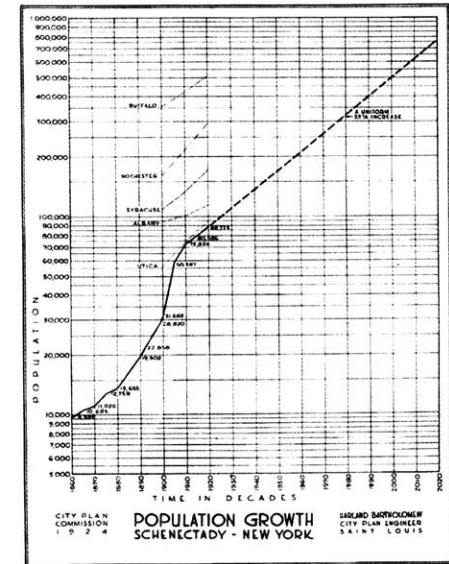


Fig 4.01

*Non-stop growth in population projected in the 1924 plan for Schenectady.*



Fig 4.02

*A team from Bartholomew & Associates working on the 1948 plan for Schenectady.*



Fig 4.03

*City officials extolling the virtues of the Town of Tomorrow plan.*

### Selling a New Tomorrow

Before the plan was even completed, supporters realized, like the men of Chicago in 1909, that to “cast it unheralded and unsupported upon a disinterested city would be to condemn it to early oblivion.”<sup>7</sup> In 1947, as the Schenectady Town of Tomorrow Committee began to craft a new vision that would include recommendations from Bartholomew’s Plan, they were determined to avoid mistakes of the past. Despite the fact that the 1924 Plan “was prepared by far-seeing leaders,” it was never completely carried out because not everyone knew about it, and therefore it sat “gathering dust on the shelf for 20 years.”<sup>8</sup> To bring the plan to the citizens, the Town of Tomorrow [TOT] was promoted through “essays, speeches and poster contests in the schools, letters and slogan contests, editorials, lectures, radio forums, store window displays, booklets and the like.”<sup>9</sup> By early 1948, over 130 talks had been given by TOT speakers to more than 10,000 people.<sup>10</sup>

Even before many residents had an opportunity to consider the specifics of the plan, they were inundated by lofty proclamations touting all the great things that the plan was going to do for them and the city. Moreover they were encouraged to talk up the plan with their families, friends, and neighbors. The following is a brief sampling of what was being said about the plan:

- *It will give the city ‘a home town which will be the envy of thousands of other communities and the pride of every Schenectadian.’*
- *It will give young people ‘a vision and a goal to which they can dedicate their enthusiasm for years to come.’*
- *Schenectady could become ‘the metropolis of the Mohawk Valley, the distribution center for upstate New York and the transportation hub of the northeastern states.’<sup>11</sup>*
- *“This marks the beginning of one of the most significant and important periods in the history of our city.”*
- *“This, without a doubt is the most forward looking plan for overall betterment that has ever been conceived in our city. It is up to every Schenectadian to insure its realization.”<sup>12</sup>*

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

- *Headline: TOT Plan Means Less Taxes, Richer City, Meeting Told*
- *“...we will show the whole country what a town can do when its people put their backs to the wheel month in and month out....”<sup>13</sup>*

The Town of Tomorrow, as part of its 10-Year Plan for Civic Rehabilitation, devised two five-year plans that were divided into either Civic or Commercial and Industrial projects. Proposals that related more directly to the downtown included: housing projects (at least 2,500 units but mostly outside the downtown); slum clearance in the 22 Block area around city hall; widening of downtown streets; a new civic auditorium; a new central high school; improved transit facilities; a face lifting of State Street; a modern central bus terminal; and a new Schenectady Museum.<sup>14</sup> But it was slum-clearance around city hall, made possible through urban renewal, that would capture most of the planning resources of the city for years to come.

### Making Way for a New Vision

The Federal Urban Renewal program, which was created through Title I of the 1949 Housing Act, provided cities with the tools and about two-thirds of the money to deal with substandard conditions. The primary objectives of the program were to:

1. Eliminate substandard and other inadequate housing through clearance of slums and blighted areas.
2. Stimulate housing production and community development sufficient to remedy the housing shortage
3. Realize the goal of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.<sup>15</sup>

Although these objectives and the fact that it was part of the Federal Housing Administration would imply that housing was the primary focus, the provisions of Title I, as Jon C. Teaford explains “were ambiguous enough to accommodate the dreams of its varied supporters.” Despite the fact that the “federal government would subsidize only the redevelopment of areas that were primarily residential before clearance or would become primarily residential after reconstruction” the actual wording provided a number of loopholes which allowed cities and developers to destroy residential neighborhoods and replace them with



**Fig 4.04**

*Primer for educating the public on the Town of Tomorrow plan for Schenectady and encouraging them to get behind the effort.*



**Fig 4.05**

*A futuristic vision for the County of Schenectady from the Mohawk Indian's perspective.*



**Fig 4.06**

*Typical of the conditions publicized to justify the need for slum removal.*

commercial areas.<sup>16</sup> But in many cases it was actually the federal government that killed plans that had any residential component to them. In one of Schenectady's major urban renewal projects, which entailed removing an entire neighborhood around city hall, the Federal Housing Administration said "it would not approve the project if housing was included."<sup>17</sup>

The area around the City Hall, referred to as the "22 Block Area" because it encompassed around 22 acres, was described in the 1948 Plan as "the largest single area requiring redevelopment in the city." This plan showed a graphic of the area redeveloped with new three-story, row apartment buildings, new parking lots, room for future commercial and garden apartment expansion, and a streetscape similar to that proposed in the recent *1999 Downtown Schenectady Design Guidelines*. Before the start of the state or federal urban renewal projects the area was largely residential and consisted of buildings dating from the 1870s to early 1900s. While a number of them were considered to be substandard or deteriorated, many of them were well cared for and not in need of any substantial repair before project plans had been announced. But in many people's view, slums should be removed before they affected the land values of the surrounding areas. Typical of the rhetoric of the day is this excerpt from a radio address by Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey of Minneapolis in 1948:

*Slums, rotten, broken down areas, are the ulcers which may develop into the cancer that will consume the physical and economic structure of the industrial city. Slum areas are extravagances that eat up our revenues and destroy our strength. Either we lick the slums or the slums will destroy the city.<sup>18</sup>*

### **Planned Blight**

A number of critics of urban renewal have described a phenomenon often referred to as planning or planners' blight. Once a project area has been slated for renewal or some other "improvement" that implies displacing the residents or businesses, a natural process of disinvestment begins. The time span between the announcement of the project or even just the rumors about it, and when the residents are forced to leave can often be substantial. "As soon as an area is selected for redevelopment, trouble begins for the

Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

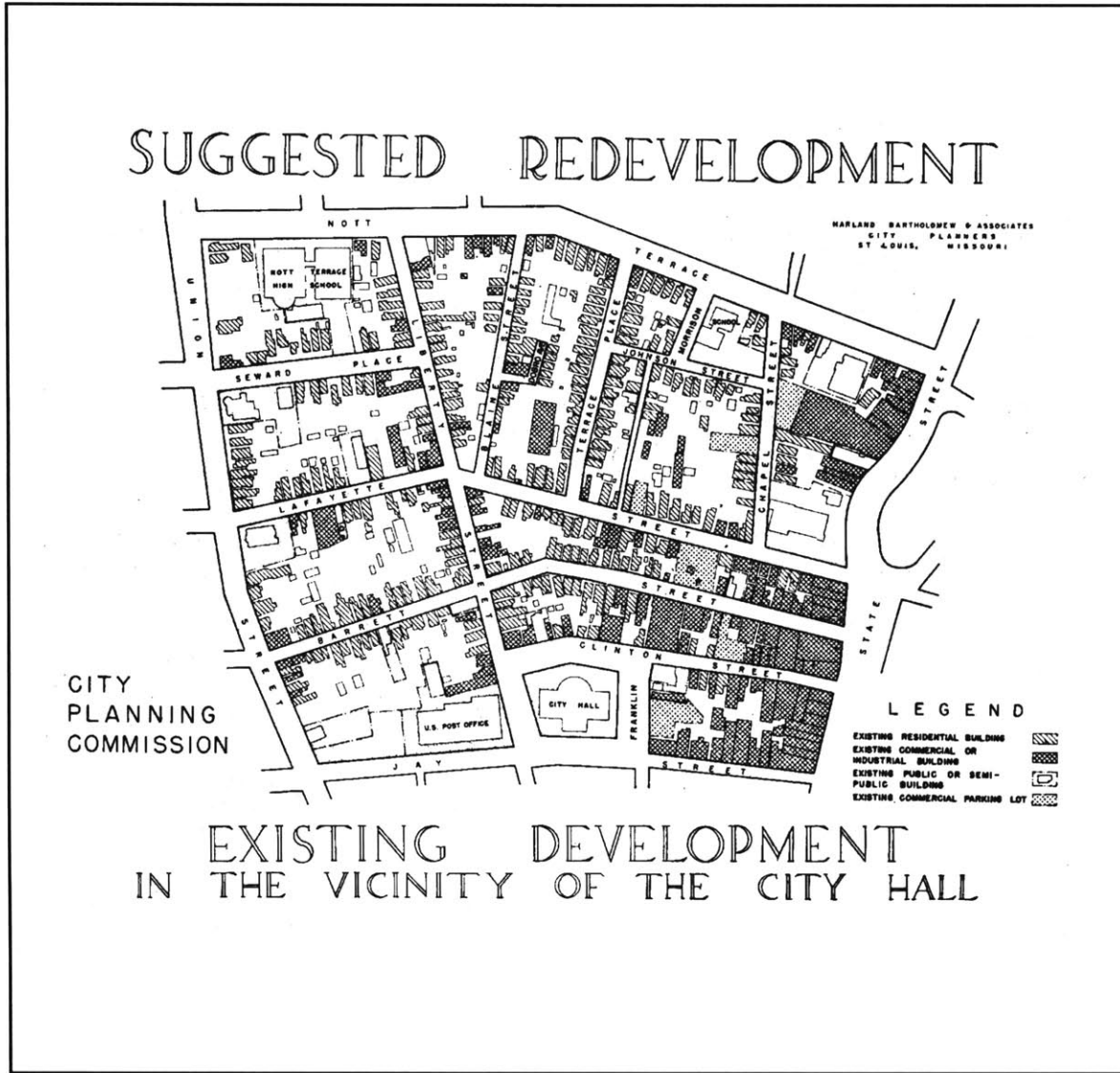


Fig 4.07

*Proposed area for redevelopment and renewal. From the 1948 Comprehensive Plan for Schenectady—later to become known as the 22 Block area.*





**Fig 4.08**

*Typical street and conditions in the 22 Block redevelopment area, although not typical of the publicized scene.*

residents. If their homes need repair, they hesitate to spend the money without knowing whether they will be compensated; if a rented flat becomes vacant, the owner may have to accept undesirable tenants or none at all because the stable tenant is looking for a place he'll be able to occupy for a while."<sup>19</sup> During this time, the neighborhood becomes unstable, and property assessments and conditions generally decline rapidly. Barrie Needham in *How Cities Work: An Introduction* refers to this as "Planning Blight" and points out that this downward cycle in property values can sometimes help planners by making acquisition less expensive.<sup>20</sup> It can benefit planners and politician because by the time they actually begin to raze a formerly viable neighborhood, it may have deteriorated to the point that the public outcry is muted and most people are glad to see it go. In the federal portion of the urban renewal area in Schenectady, a span of over 10 years had elapsed from the time the project was first reported until the first structures were being razed. Adding to that, residents complained that the city had "lowered the assessed valuation" of their properties "to make way for cheap purchase..."<sup>21</sup> before the plan had even been announced.

While cities like Schenectady were concerned with substandard conditions and the well-being of the people who lived in these areas, they were also concerned with low tax rates caused by deteriorated conditions, or land which was not being used most efficiently. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, throughout the 1950s and 60s, cities were waging a battle against *blight* and were largely ignoring *slums*. Robert Beauregard in *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of Cities* makes the distinction between blight and slums and explains that it is largely a function of where they are in a city. "Blight was confined to central business districts and slums to neighborhoods."<sup>22</sup>

Blight carried with it a higher potential tax assessment, and therefore was more attractive to deal with. Since cities had to pay for up to one-third of the cost of land clearing, they were more inclined to initiate projects where their return was greater. This included both the return on investment from the initial resale, and the long term property tax increase. In Schenectady, the local paper expressed a similar view, explaining that "the area chosen for redevelopment may not contain the worst slum buildings because consideration must be given to a location that will allow accompanying benefits from street widening and

## **Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place**

construction of substantial business, rather than residential buildings.”<sup>23</sup> Typically those residential buildings that were removed were not replaced. By June 1971, of the more than 500,000 housing units razed, just over 200,000 had been replaced.<sup>24</sup> This only compounded the problem of affordable housing for many, and severely limited their choice when it came to location.

For those who lived in the targeted urban renewal area in Schenectady, the options were few. Most residents who lived in conditions that were less than perfect could not afford to settle anywhere else. “Finding homes for the families will not be an easy task, as many of them have several families,” a news article explained. “One family included eleven children and the father pays a monthly rent of \$20 on their home.” The project manager, however, did explain that he “would exert every effort to see that these families are relocated in decent, safe and sanitary dwellings within their financial reach.”<sup>25</sup>

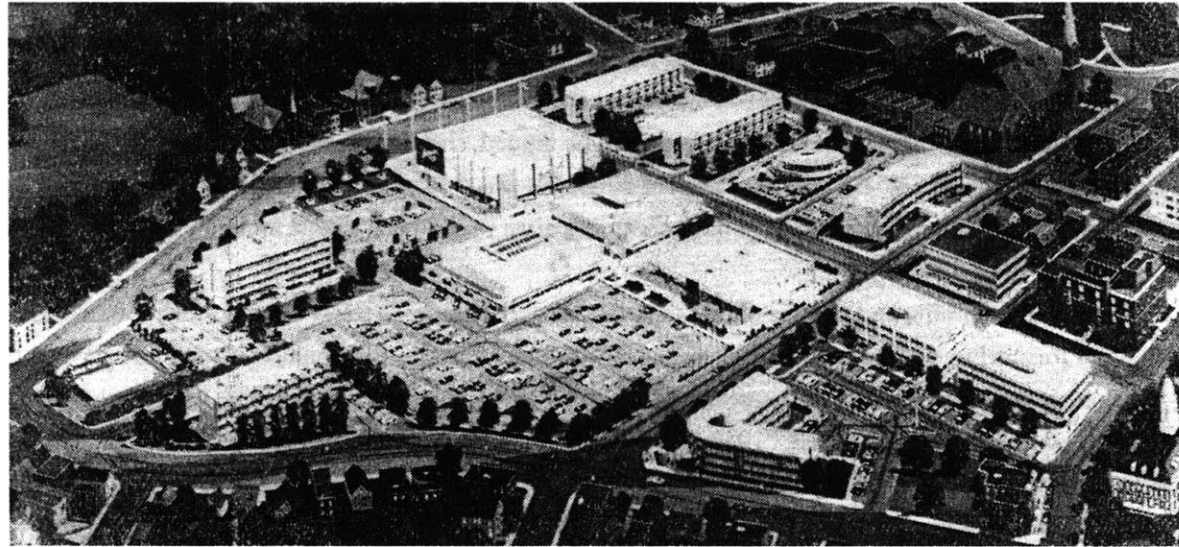
### **Limited Options**

Despite the hundreds of civic-minded organizations involved in promoting the plan, it was not considered a participatory planning process by any stretch of the imagination. Overall, the residents of the area were strongly opposed to the plan and had not been swayed by the Town of Tomorrow marketing. “We’re not interested in the Town of Tomorrow—we’re interested in our 22-block area. Our homes are in it. Our livelihood is in it.”<sup>26</sup> When they were finally given a forum to voice their opinions, it was a meaningless gesture. The decisions that involved their livelihood had already been finalized and were not about to be reversed. As one councilman noted, “You can’t stop progress. They are in an area scheduled for improvements to make Schenectady greater and better.”<sup>27</sup>

Decisions about clearing the land had also been made well before the city had a detailed plan of how it should be redeveloped. A number of ideas and a rationale for the plan were suggested. Often, however, they seemed to contradict any common sense or logic. Initially, the plan was portrayed as a way to help the downtown and the existing businesses. By adding more businesses and parking the city felt it could assist the merchants in the rest of downtown. By adding an additional parallel business street, it would relieve

**Fig 4.09**

*The grand vision of the Lewis Empire Plaza development scheme that never happened. It was to contain a much broader mix and intensity of buildings than was ever realized.*



some of the congestion of the central business district. But Councilman Samuel S. Stratton had reservations about the city spending so much money to expand the business district when the economic situation had changed for the worse. "I wonder if the merchants feel their problem is not having enough stores to take some of the business they're not getting away from them," he said. Further he implored the city to first get firm commitments from merchants who want to located there, explaining that given the poor economy, they might not be interested when the project is completed. But as another councilmen observed, "There is evidence enough to indicate it will be a big success" adding, "Stratton is about the only person in the city against it."<sup>28</sup>

#### **A New Downtown Center**

As the idea for the land shifted over time towards the creation of a large-scale suburban shopping plaza rather than a mix of buildings, merchants began to worry about its impact on their businesses. The massive shopping center with its large parking area would have an unfair advantage, especially since the property

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

taxes paid by the merchants would partially subsidize the project. An attorney for the merchants told the Citizens Participating Committee on Urban Redevelopment that the a big shopping center would have “grave effects” on the existing downtown businesses and would essentially create three separate sections in the downtown. The urban redevelopment project, he argued, should remain in the “realm of public use and public improvement” if it is to benefit all of the downtown.<sup>29</sup> Planners from time to time reminded the merchants that the parking created for a big shopping plaza would be available to their customers as well.

After years of planning and intense efforts to assemble and clear large tracts of land, only one developer stepped forward to develop the 22 Block area. He promised to put \$10 million into the development. This news was greeted as the “greatest thing ever to hit Schenectady.” The headline of the Schenectady Gazette on New Years’ Day read: “1959 May See Dream Become Reality in Urban Renewal Area.” An accompanying graphic featured an aerial rendering of the proposed project site with restaurants, office buildings, retail stores, motels and hotels, apartments, and a department store. Prior to this, only one other building had been constructed in the redevelopment area.

In March of 1963, the city repossessed the land from Lewis-Empire Plaza, Inc., the company that a few years before had been touted as the “greatest thing ever to hit Schenectady.” After four years of little activity, the company had defaulted on its taxes. Construction on one hotel had begun, but as one council member noted there had been almost no activity until just before election day, and then the equipment and crews would move in. Soon after election day, activity on the site would cease. Predictably, the following year activity would resume during election season. “Remember our Republican Mayor sitting on the famous bulldozer four years ago (in the urban redevelopment area)?” Democratic candidate for Mayor Dr. Fred Isabella reminded a crowd in 1963. Continuing he asked, “Where is the taxable building they were boasting about?”<sup>30</sup> For Schenectady, “Just about everything that could go wrong with an urban renewal project did.”<sup>31</sup> And even before, while they had been going wrong or going nowhere, the city broke ground on other urban renewal projects. In commenting on the council’s approval for the planning commission to begin more renewal projects in 1957, Mayor Stratton said, “After two years and the



**Fig 4.10**

*For years the 22 Block area was “shovel ready” for development—waiting for someone with a wide vision and deep pockets.*

## Chapter 4: Yesterday's "Town of Tomorrow"

expenditure of hundreds of thousands of dollars, nobody has any idea how this vacant land is going to be used. The crying need today is to see the present project through successfully, not begin tearing down any more real estate."<sup>32</sup>

### **Today's Reality**

More than twenty years after the Town of Tomorrow was first envisioned, Schenectady was just closing in on the completion of one its major capstone projects, the 22 Block urban renewal site near city hall. A Holiday Inn was finally built, a few office buildings were constructed, a Firestone Auto Service Center opened, and the Two Guys department store opened with a separate hardware store across the street. The department store and hardware store lasted just under twenty years. The department store was eventually converted into offices. The hardware store became a car dealership, then a managed health care facility, and is now empty. The Firestone Center closed a few years ago and the building remains vacant. The Holiday Inn continues to do well, and the office buildings, despite occasional vacancies, have been successful. But overall, the site appears underdeveloped, with large parking lots occupying important intersections, a few nondescript buildings, minimal landscaping, and almost no pedestrian activity or street life. Despite the futuristic visions, lofty proclamations, and millions in taxpayer dollars spent, the Town of Tomorrow was a thing of the past before its time ever came.



## Assumptions, Directions, and Visions

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*Planning theory is what planners need when they get stuck: another way to formulate a problem, a way to anticipate outcomes, a source of reminders about what is important, a way of paying attention that provides direction, strategy, and coherence.<sup>1</sup>*

**John Forester**, *Planning in the Face of Power*

Urban redevelopment or renewal was well underway in Schenectady by the time Title I of the Federal Housing Act of 1949 made it an official program and continued through the program's abandonment in 1974. During the formative years of the program, planning was considered by many to be an almost scientific process. Planners were the experts, it was thought, and would understand the needs and aspirations of the community better than the community itself knew them. Planners would be able to apply rational thinking and a straight forward problem-solving processes to fix the problems that the community was facing. This "rational-comprehensive position," as John Forester explains is not part of the real or messy world but an abstraction. Further, it *assumes that the decision-makers have:*

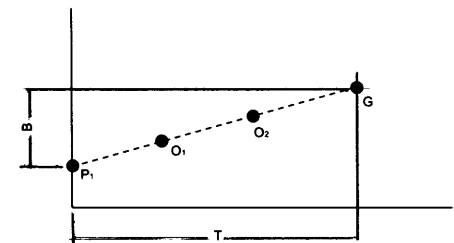
- *a well-defined problem;*
- *a full array of alternatives to consider;*
- *full baseline information;*
- *complete information about the consequences of each alternative;*
- *full information about the values and preferences of citizens; and*
- *fully adequate time, skill, and resources.<sup>2</sup>*

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

In taking this abstraction further, it might be argued that a simple planning problem could be attacked using a basic problem-solving method of goals, objectives, and strategies. This process would begin with either a goal in mind or a problem that needs to be addressed. The problem could be thought of as *where we are*, and the goal as *where we want to be*. To reach the goal, may entail meeting a number of objectives or interim goals first. In order to accomplish these objectives, a plan of action or strategies must be developed for each. Using Schenectady's 22 Block urban renewal project as an example, the problem might have been thought to be: *property values in the downtown area were too low, and therefore the tax revenue collected was too low*. In correcting this problem, the city might have seen their goal as *collecting more tax revenue in the downtown area*. In order to do this the city may have determined that one objective that would have to be met to reach this goal would be a to *create a higher land value in the lowest assessed areas near the downtown*. And finally, the strategy they may have settled on to reach this objective might have been to *purchase or use the powers of eminent domain to acquire all the properties in that area, clear the land, and resell it to a private developer*.

If we simplify and abstract this process even more and begin to imagine it as a linear time series, we can represent it graphically as a straight line, or vector, with one endpoint being the problem, and the other being the goal. Points along the line would represent the objectives and the segments in between them would represent the strategies needed to reach each objective. The overall line would represent the intended path or desired trajectory. The horizontal distance between the problem and the goal would represent the time span from inception to completion. The vertical distance between these two would represent the improvement from problem to solution. The slope of the line would represent the degree of difficulty in reaching the goal.

At this point, using this problem-solving method the problems of a city seem simple and straightforward, and the solutions well within reach. But continuing with this abstraction it might be said that any point below the desired goal would represent an unintended outcome. Any point below the problem or starting point would represent the incorrect identification of the problem. There may also, however, be multiple



**Fig 5.01**

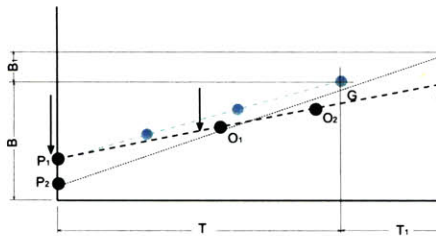
*Abstract straight line problem solving process where P= Problem; O= Objective; G=Goal; B= Improvement; and T= Time. The dashed line represents strategies and the overall path.*



problems, objectives, and strategies that would follow slightly different paths, but all directed towards the goal. These would be represented by a number of lines converging to one point. Likewise, there may be multiple goals coming out of multiple problems, in which case a number of lines would be crossing paths, running parallel, converging, or separating.

Objectives that are outside of the desired trajectory or any of the intended paths would represent ones that do not contribute to the overall goal. Each one of these points along the path and the path itself (from identifying the problem to setting the goal) would involve a number of decisions or assumptions. The more accurate the assumption or the more complete the information they are based on, the more predictable the outcome would be. Faulty assumptions would lead to missed objectives and unmet goals.

In the 22 Block redevelopment area for example, the city assumed that *by tearing down the existing area, and creating a “shovel ready” site, developers would line up to redevelop the area.* That assumption turned out to be faulty and the project took much longer than expected. From a planning perspective, this means that where time and money allow, each assumption should be based on full information or careful study, such as market analysis, preference surveys, demographic studies, or whatever other means of analysis will ensure that the assumptions are as close to certain as possible.



**Fig 5.02**

*A more complicated process affected by externalities causing an increase in time, worsening problem, and an end solution that cannot be expected to address the new problem.*

Any project or planning process is also likely to be affected by a number of forces that act on it from the outside with the potential to delay or prevent it from reaching the stated goals. These externalities may include such things as changes in the economy, changes in retail habits or preferences, shifts in family demographics, or cutbacks in federal funding. Long delays in any project caused by any number of things can set off a long chain reaction making externalities more likely to affect the outcome. In Schenectady’s urban renewal project, faulty assumptions caused an increase in the time span from project inception to completion and left it more vulnerable to externalities. During that time span, the economy had worsened, more people had moved to the suburbs, and additional shopping malls had been built and were capturing an even larger share of the retail market. Therefore, even if the initial proposed project had

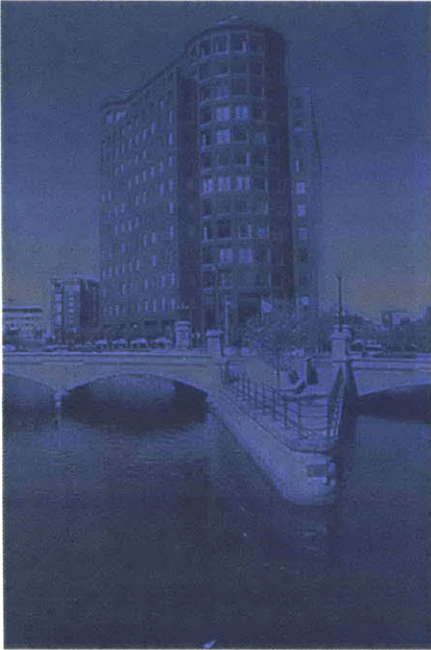
## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

been correctly suited to deal with the initial problem, the project as designed would either be less effective, or would need to have been augmented to meet the rising intensity of the problem. The more a project is prepared to deal with the externalities and changing circumstance or the more adaptable it is to unforeseen circumstances, the more likely is its success. There are, of course, any number of unforeseen circumstances that can arise during the duration of project that cannot be planned for or predicted. In the majority of cases, however, where a project is considered to have failed due to “unforeseen circumstance” it is more likely caused by the lack of exhaustiveness in accounting for externalities or making assumptions.

But in reality, the planning process would be almost impossible to represent using straight lines. More likely it would resemble the messiness of a number of highway interchanges, traffic circles, dead ends or other paths with no clearly defined direction, starting point, or termination. It would also likely have to be drawn on an x-y-z coordinate system to represent the third dimension of the many possible unforeseen circumstances and externalities. As John Forester points out, the real conditions under which planners operate are more likely to include:

- *ambiguous and poorly defined problems;*
- *incomplete information about alternatives;*
- *incomplete information about the baseline, the background of “the problem”;*
- *incomplete information about the consequences of supposed alternatives;*
- *incomplete information about the range and content of values, preferences, and interests; and*
- *limited time, limited skills, and limited resources.*

But to a larger degree, even when the problems are correctly defined—objectives and strategies developed, and goals met—the outcome can be something that is, in effect, worse than the problem or just not desired. This may occur because of a lack of vision, or lack of understanding about where the community wants to go. If for instance, a city decided traffic congestion along its Main Street was the problem, and the goal was to allow it to move more efficiently, by eliminating parking, narrowing sidewalks, and getting rid of cross-



**Fig 5.03**  
*Citizen's Bank Plaza which celebrates its location at the confluence of two rivers and the importance of that site.*

walks, they could meet their goal. But in effect they would have destroyed many opportunities for human contact. The goal, although met, would not be desirable. But if, however, part of their larger vision was to create a lively and convenient downtown that encourages human interaction, it would be clear that creating a highway through their downtown would not add to the environment they are trying to create.

When Providence, Rhode Island began its revitalization, it not only had a number of goals and objectives it wanted to achieve, but it also had a vision in mind, a story it wanted to tell, and an image it wanted to project. Its story and founding had been one of water, both a freshwater spring and its location along major riverways. As the settlement began to grow, its reliance on the water intensified. Water became the lifeblood of the shipping and later manufacturing industries. But as the waters' importance to the city grew, the city's respect for it diminished. By the 1980s, traffic improvements had widened the roads and bridges to the point that there was almost no sign of the Providence River. The River, and its importance to the city was a story that many felt was worth telling. Plans were drawn up to uncover the river, nearby artists began to illustrate tiles and create other exhibits that would line the new bridges and walkways and help tell the story. Development was directed where it would have the greatest impact and help reinforce and respect the rivers' edges. At the confluence of the Woonasquatucket and Moshassuck Rivers, the site where Roger Williams landed in Rhode Island in 1636 and settled Providence, a financial center with ground floor restaurants and plazas was designed and erected to mark and celebrate the coming together of those two rivers and the beginnings of a city.

Fire had also been an important part of Providence's story. A number of homes had been burned during King Phillip's War in 1775 and more buildings lost during a great conflagration in 1801. These events shaped the city and altered its development pattern. The understanding of these stories also adds to the richness of one of the city's newest and most famous ephemeral events, Waterfire. During this nighttime event, fires are lit along the river while music is piped under the bridges and played along the river's edge. Thousands of people line the river, eat at the nearby restaurants, view the art that has become part of the river and adjacent streetscape, and in essence, become part of the story of the renaissance of the city.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Providence's rebirth could not have happened without a vision or a story to tell. Everything they did reinforced or added to the story. But if instead, they only had a goal of revitalization along with strategies and objectives to meet those goals, the opportunities that they discovered and uncovered might have largely been missed. There would have been nothing to direct development along the river. Buildings might have been built along the covered river with no orientation of respect for it and in such a way as to prohibit future reclamation of that great resource. A number of projects might have been considered a success if they helped in any way to revitalize the city, but without the vision, Providence might only be the story of a city that was revitalized, or rebuilt, but not one that was reborn. The river might have gone unnoticed and unappreciated. People today would not be going there to discover it and take part in its story. The story of the past might have been lost, and the present and future story of the city would read much different.

When entire areas or neighborhoods are removed and redeveloped all at once, such as in the 22 Block area, their stories, however interesting they might have been, are largely lost. The new story of the area, has no link with the past, and therefore provides no continuum from the past to the future. The story of the process, however interesting and filled with drama, conspiracy, or tragedy, is for the most part irrelevant. What matters to most people is the outcome, what is left in the wake of the process. Good planning entails improving the social and physical aspects of the community. It should assist in managing change for the better, not prohibiting it or insisting on change for its own sake. When the goals are met, but the outcomes are not generally desirable, it can often be traced back to a lack of vision.

In addition to the lack of vision that plagues many communities as well as the projects or initiatives that they embark upon, there are a number of other mistakes that are often made. The following is a brief list of some of the common pitfalls that projects often fall into.



**Fig 5.04**

*Night view of the recently rediscovered Providence River.*

## Chapter 5: Assumptions, Directions, and Vision

1. *Inappropriate Transfer*: Many projects are tied to a particular region or a climate. When they are transplanted to other areas that are quite dissimilar, they often fail. The pedestrian promenades and sunny boardwalks that are prevalent in more temperate climates often failed when tried in the north-east, because of harsh environment most of the year.
2. *Geographic Fit* is an element that is often lacking when small or mid-sized cities plan projects as if they are in the center of a much bigger metropolitan region. Projects that would typically draw from a small radius in a highly populated region, end up having to draw from a radius that is much larger and often not feasible in the less dense markets.
3. *Project Inertia* involves the forces that allow project proposals that are no longer viable to continue. These are often projects where either the conditions that originally made them viable have changed or the projects themselves have changed. Constrained by tightening budgets and other changing circumstances, projects are downsized to the point that they are really no longer feasible and should be scrapped. But when these projects involve powerful backers and those who have staked their reputation on the their completion, they become unstoppable
4. *Unrealistic Expectations* can endanger projects that are dependent on a long list of improbable factors falling into place in order to make them a success. If any of the variables fail to fall into place, these types of projects often fail. Usually those pushing these types of projects are not the financial backers.
5. *Government Money* can often do more harm than good. Goals that were reflective of the community's wishes are altered to fit the needs of grants or program applications. The added money often changes the scope of the original project so that it no longer serves the community. The strings attached to the "free" state and federal money often prove to be costly and too restrictive.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

6. *Corporate Entitlements* are often doled out by the cities that can least afford to do so. Invariably, these cities outspend their budgets trying to put together tax incentives and other benefit packages to lure big businesses into their community. In addition, they often agree to make costly infrastructure investments to serve these new businesses. When these subsidies run their course, these businesses often leave for the next community that will agree to subsidize their expansion or relocation.
7. *Images of Grandeur*: While it is important for cities to strive for greatness, too many smaller cities try to become something that their size and location make improbable. Instead of striving to reinforce those qualities that are attainable and make them more livable, some communities endeavor to become something much more than they ever could and end up achieving something much less than they should.
8. *“Progress” at any Cost*: Cities and mayors in particular feel that if they are not rebuilding then the city is dying. Many backwards and irreversible steps are made in the name of progress. Anyone who opposes such projects is considered to be living in the past or against progress. In the meantime, progress toward meaningful community goals is stifled.
9. *Unfulfilled Goals* or a lingering project memory often puts old proposals back on the table. These are typically plans that have remained in the collective memory of the community. Sometimes they are seen as unfulfilled goals and end up as priority projects despite the fact that many have forgotten why they were so important in the first place. When these projects are finally built, they may be based on the needs of years past rather than today.
10. *Personalities and Alliances*: Many bad proposals and projects get built while many good ones go unrealized because decisions are based not on the soundness of the idea but by the people involved. Those that are part of this process, soon lose sight of community goals and are unable to evaluate any proposal objectively.

## Chapter 5: Assumptions, Directions, and Vision

11. *Missed Opportunities & Unrealized Assets:* This is usually related to projects that don't happen or to the siting of ones that do. Often cities miss opportunities to get more of an impact from a project because it is located away from areas where it could add and gain benefit from the uses around it. In addition, many projects fail to take into account the many local assets that are right before them, and spend millions of dollars to attract businesses or uses that are no different than those already in the community.

By considering the projects and initiatives of the past, we can begin to understand where things have gone wrong and explore ways to avoid costly mistakes in the future. For cities, each project and proposal is filled with numerous assumptions that must be made. Faulty assumptions or unrealistic goals will only continue to ensure that projects or initiatives do not meet their goals. But when these goals are not based on a vision, they cannot help a community to move forward in a meaningful way that enables them to capture and benefit from the stories that are all around them—just waiting to be told and added to.





## Rethinking the 22 Block Urban Renewal Project

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*Nothing is more sad than the death of an illusion.*

**Arthur Koestler**

The dialog for the redevelopment of the 22 Block area east of city hall, heralded as “one of the most important moves in city’s history” had started well before the original application had been filed with the state’s Municipal Housing Authority [MHA] on October 1, 1946.<sup>1</sup> The initial goal that the city seemed to be trying to reach was to collect more in property tax in the downtown area. But early in the process, the goals and objectives seemed to shift constantly, not to fit the problem, but to fit the criteria of the state and federal urban renewal programs. Therefore, many of the goals that the program later espoused may have been mere justifications for the program’s existence. Perhaps it could be argued that the motivation for taking advantage of these programs was because they offered a way to help increase the revenue collected by the city in property taxes near the downtown. Slum clearance assisted by both the state and federal governments was just a tool to achieve this. A review of the project reveals that few of the goals that eventually became part of the plan such as increasing business for the downtown, creating a secondary business district, or improving the lives of the people living in the area, were ever attained or impossible to measure. Few understood back then the price that “free” big government money would place on both the residents who lived there and those who now have to deal with the impact it has had on the form and function of that part of the city. By foregoing state and federal money with the many strings attached, the city might have discovered a different path to realizing their original goal, as well as many of the subsequent goals that were not part of the projects early motivations. And in doing, the city would have been able to add to the story of a once proud neighborhood, rather than erasing it and starting from scratch.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

### Project Goals or Motivations

#### *Slum or Blight Removal*

The lack of specifications for classifying properties as standard or substandard provided an opportunity for cities to determine this based on goals that were unrelated to housing. In many cases, this led to a double standard being applied. “An official who is interested in speeding up the process of an urban renewal project may be tempted to apply high housing standards in order to justify the condemnation of part of the city, and, later on, to apply low housing standards in order to justify the quick relocation of displaced people.”<sup>2</sup> When the loose standards are combined with the notion of planning blight, it makes a determination of the property conditions prior to the early proposals of the mid-1940s uncertain. People’s recollections of the neighborhood that encompassed the 22 Block area varies, with those who recall it from the late 1940s more likely to refer to it as “a real nice neighborhood” while those whose recollections are from much later tend to describe it as a “run-down” section of the city. Photographic evidence from the early 1940s seems to indicate a different neighborhood than what is depicted prior to its removal over ten years later.

#### *Improving the Tax Base*

The promise of strengthening and even increasing the tax base was perhaps one of the most influential factors which led cities to engage in urban renewal programs. “The thought of bright and orderly new buildings pouring tax revenues into the city treasury [was] too much a temptation to resist.”<sup>3</sup> The Real Estate Board in Schenectady in 1950 estimated that clearance of just the state funded projects within the 22 Block area “would result in an estimated increase of approximately \$20 million in assessed valuation in this area within the next 10 years.”<sup>4</sup> The final building on the site was not constructed for another 15 years, and overall, the site was never developed to the extent anticipated. If we take the following factors that are typical of these projects into account it seems unlikely that the project ever had the tax benefit that the city had built its hopes on:

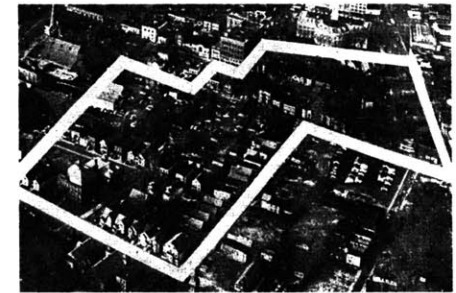


Fig 6.01

*One section of the 22 Block area.*



Fig 6.02

## Chapter 6: Rethinking the 22 Block Project

- The assessed value of properties was often lowered prior to the cities trying to purchase or condemn them, to decrease the amount they would have to pay for them. This lowered assessment had the effect of lowering the amount of taxes collect prior to acquisition of the properties.
- As the conditions of the neighborhood deteriorated, tax assessment may have also decreased—effectively lowering what the city could collect.
- After the properties were taken or purchased, no taxes were collected on the properties until after they had been purchased or redeveloped.
- Overall the area was never developed to the density or level planned, creating a gap between what cities had anticipated the taxable value of the land would be and what it actually ended up being.



**Fig 6.03**

*Scenes like this were shown in the local newspapers at the time to show some of the bad existing conditions, but there were few scenes of the good conditions.*

As Martin Anderson explains, “Taxes are not paid on nonexistent buildings, and when the urban renewal bulldozers sweep through an area of the city, the tax revenue to the city decreases by the amount of taxes that were previously paid on the demolished buildings.”<sup>5</sup> Another consideration is how the value on the land might have changed if the properties had undergone renovation rather than removal. While many cities were using urban renewal money to drastically change land-use near the core, other cities, such as Providence, Rhode Island, backed by its landmark study, *College Hill: A Demonstration Study of Historic Area Renewal*, began to find ways to use urban renewal funds to revitalize neighborhoods.

### *Improving the Lives of the “Slum Dwellers”*

It was clear that for the hundreds of families living in the 22 Block area this was their neighborhood and their home. They did not consider it a slum and the majority of them wanted to stay. Unfortunately, no record was made of where each family relocated to and no interviews were conducted at the time to determine if these people felt their conditions or lives had improved. Therefore, city officials had no way of measuring whether they had achieved this goal. But with all the properties gone, it is obvious that the city did at least meet its goal of removing what it considered “substandard” housing in the area.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

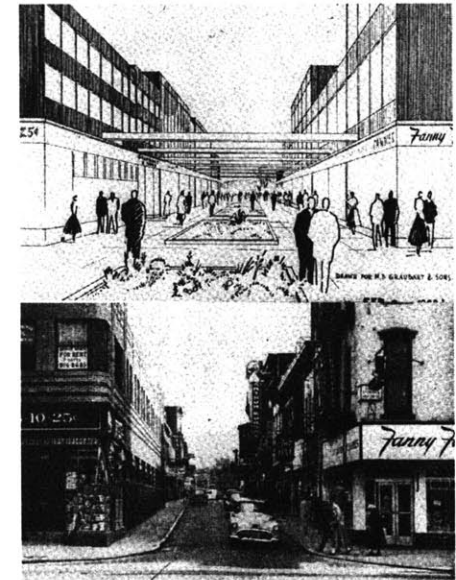
For those residents who were moved to Yates Village, a newly constructed MHA housing project, its location over 2 miles from their former neighborhood left them isolated from their jobs and the conveniences of the downtown. With no public transportation or car for many of them, it was an area that offered little in the way of opportunity. For those businesses that had been displaced, some relocated while others closed up for good. But many of those that relocated were separated from their loyal customer base, making the relocation even more difficult. Many, however, were unable to find another area with the rents they could afford. For those that had lived above their shops, Yates Village and many of the other residential government solutions did not provide that type of opportunity.

### *A New Business Street and an Expanded District*

Schenectady's downtown in the late 1940s was still bustling enough to prompt those involved in the urban renewal project to use the Yogi Berra logic *that no one goes there anymore because its too crowded*. An expanded business district and the creation of a new business street parallel to State Street, they thought, would help relieve the congestion and bring more people downtown. But as Schenectady historian Larry Hart writes of the decade of 1950-1960:

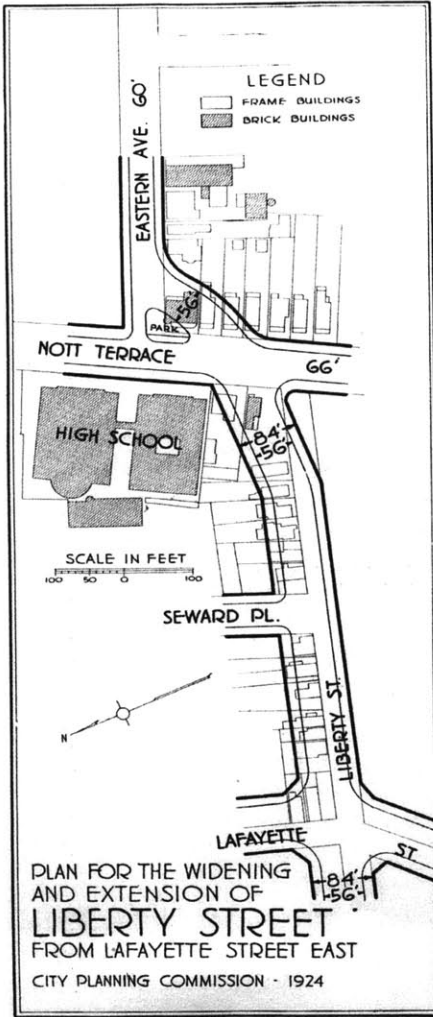
*The downtown length of State Street, devoid of trolley tracks for the first time in more than a half century, was completely repaved with macadam by 1952. This gave Schenectady's old shopping core a fresh, clean look and prompted many store owners to install modern facades on their establishments. They all anticipated a bright busy future. It was all very deceiving.<sup>6</sup>*

By the time plans were underway in the early 1950s, it was obvious that the downtown business was starting to decline. The logic had changed; the planners now insisted that this new business district would help the existing businesses and that they would get a share of this new influx of expected shoppers. Franklin Street, which was supposed to be the new secondary shopping street was eventually developed, but mostly into small office buildings. This was partly due to the faulty assumptions of the development pressure that was expected but never transpired, but also a manifestation of the changing retail model—from shops



**Fig 6.04**

*During and after the urban renewal of the 22 Block area much of the rest of the downtown was looking to freshen-up the façades of the buildings. Image is of the corner of State and Jay Streets. (Jay is now a pedestrian mall.)*



**Fig 6.05**  
*Street widening in the 22 Block area  
 from the 1924 plan.*

along the street to the isolated, stand-alone center with its vast acreage of parking. The only major retailer in the redevelopment area, Two Guys, was a few blocks away from the main axis of the downtown. It was situated with its parking lot away from the downtown, acting as an edge to the residential neighborhoods nearby and far enough away to be of no use to downtown shoppers. The planners had not expanded the business district, but created a separate one. It was never part of the “downtown scene” and probably never had the draw from the 50-mile radius that some of the developers had envisioned. Because of the many developments like it in the suburbs, it is unlikely that it ever brought suburban shoppers downtown, but at most it may have provided an alternative to those who would otherwise have had to venture into the old downtown.

*Street Widening and Construction*

One of the few goals that was reached in the city’s main urban renewal area was to widen the streets, and expand the circulation network, traffic volume, and speed through the area. A number of streets were widened or extended while others were discontinued and a few new ones created. The new widths of these streets were based on expectation of future growth and traffic, despite the fact that the city had been losing population since 1930. The streets in that area have never carried the traffic that they were intended for. Their treeless edges and low-intensity bordering uses have created an environment that does not invite pedestrian usage. In recent years the city has tried to address this problem and now intends to plant trees and improve the landscaping of the area. It is hoped that those measures will create a linkage, inviting people from the surrounding neighborhoods to walk downtown. Not only did the urban renewal project not expand the downtown, it created a hard edge further isolating it from other residential areas rather than a seam binding or weaving them together.

**Considering a Different Approach**

Many felt that the demise of that neighborhood was inevitable and that given the downhill direction of the neighborhood at the time, the city really had no choice. If they did nothing, some felt, the neighborhood would decline further, spread blight into the downtown, and shoppers would leave the downtown for the

## **Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place**

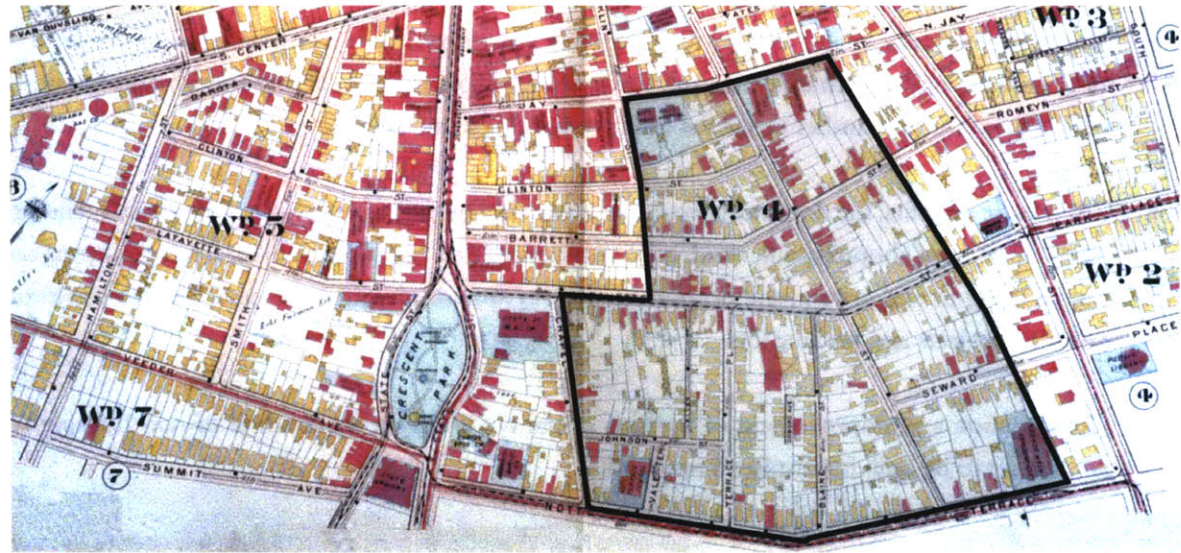
malls. In the end, the city tried to remove the “cancer” of blight, but the downtown continued to get sicker, and the shoppers continued to avoid the city and frequent the new suburban malls anyway.

The original goal of the city was to increase the revenue taken in through property tax in the downtown area. If the city had decided that the low taxes collected in the 22 Block area was the problem they had several alternatives. One was the route they took, which was to remove the structures in the area and essentially alter the land use. Another would have been to raise the tax rate that was already under attack as being too high. The third alternative, which does not seem to have been considered, would have been to develop strategies to improve the structures and upgrade the value of the area, while retaining its fine-grained texture and land-use patterns. Besides increasing the tax revenue for the city from that area, this approach might have had a number of other positive effects and prevented negative ones from occurring in addition to meeting the overall goals:

- By building up the neighborhood and helping it to revitalize from within (incumbent upgrading), it would have meant that those who remained would have had a higher quality of life than before. And although some would likely be displaced, a slower process would have reduced the amount of gentrification. In addition, for those residents who owned their homes, the upgrading and improved values would have increased their options and improved their “buy-out” if they chose to relocate as compared with the “planning blight” that reduced it and forced them to relocate.
- By strengthening the neighborhood around the downtown, it would reinforce the seam between other outlying neighborhoods and the downtown. This would encourage more pedestrian traffic through this neighborhood and into the downtown without adding to traffic or parking problem.
- The retention of this as a residential neighborhood would help ensure that the downtown remained compact and walkable, rather than spread out and more accessible by car than foot.

Fig 6.06

*1905 atlas showing the area of City Hall and much of the fine grained neighborhood of the 22 block area before urban removal and redevelopment.*



- Nearby employment opportunities and close services would benefit residents and add to the quality of life. For those who could not afford a car, this would remain a convenient place to live, shop, and work.
- The surrounding residents would add to the daytime activity and help support businesses in the off-peak hours when office workers or others are not around.
- The surrounding residential neighborhood would also reinforce the residential character within the downtown. For those living above the shops, it would prevent them from feeling like an island in a sea of commercial activity and isolated from the rest of the city's residential neighborhoods.
- Those living in and around the downtown would add to the viability of nighttime businesses and add to the safety for others who might come into the downtown during the later hours for shows, movies, or other forms of entertainment.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

- The residential area in and around the downtown would provide a convenient workforce both for local industry and merchants. The proximity would allow them to access these opportunities of employment without further taxing the traffic or parking in the area.
- Given these benefits, the downtown would be able to differentiate itself from the new malls, and provide a number of shopping and residential experiences that would be unique. By encouraging residential living in and around the downtown, the city would minimize the need for extensive road widening projects and parking lots.
- The retention and improvement of housing would cut down on the amount of new housing that would have to be built for displaced residents.

The logic of this is obviously clearer from the perspective of our time than it was back then. In thinking about it another way, it's easy to see that many of the things the planners and leaders of that era did, we would want to undo in order to build and strengthen the areas around the downtown to help revitalize the core. But this story is more than just a lesson of the need to set clear goals and ensure that all the objectives and strategies lead towards those goals; it is also about envisioning the outcome, understanding its impact on the surrounding areas, and considering all the options. Changing the objectives and rationalizing new goals to meet the demands or guidelines of federal or state programs only serves to prevent the city from reaching its original goal and ensures that the outcome will be unpredictable. Despite the rhetoric of the Town of Tomorrow and all those who pushed for the redevelopment of this area, it was clear that there never was a consistent articulated vision for the area. The only thing that was clear was that the Town of Tomorrow was destined to forget about its yesterday or today.



## Other Projects to Learn From

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*Cities are an immense laboratory of trial and error, failure and success, in city building and design. This is the laboratory in which city planning should have been learning and forming and testing its theories.*

**Jane Jacobs**, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

The end of the urban renewal era did not necessarily usher in a new way of thinking about old buildings or the speculative process of tearing them down and then waiting for developers to arrive. But after the last funds were squeezed out of that cash cow, wholesale demolition and assemblage of large tracts of land became a little tougher for Schenectady. The big project era, the string of faulty assumptions, and the unrealistic expectations for the city, however, did not end there. In fact, the grand conceptual visions and the big project approach continued—perhaps symptomatic of a condition that many of the “boom towns” based on one or two companies exhibit. Despite the long and colorful history of Schenectady, most of its development and population growth occurred in a span of about 30 years or more. The decline of the city and its downtown, however, happened much more slowly. But many in the city think that the city’s resurgence will be as explosive as its early industrial growth. Perhaps they may feel that because the city developed around one or two major companies, it will be one or two major projects that will save the city. This chapter will examine a number of large building projects as well as the continued but incremental loss of older structures due to the growth and proliferation of parking lots and their loss for street widening. It will also look at two projects that entailed selective demolition and adaptive reuse of existing structures.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

### *State Armory at the Top of Crescent Park*

In 1947, as the city was beginning its Town of Tomorrow campaign, it demolished the old State Armory at the top of Crescent (now Veterans) Park. The armory, “a mixture of old English castle and Romanesque architecture,” had been in service less than fifty years. It was Schenectady’s second armory and the second at that location. Construction on it began in 1898. It was designed by the renowned state architect Isaac Perry and hailed as “one of the finest in the state at the time. It is a building of magnificent proportion and a welcome addition to the city.”<sup>1</sup> The old armory had been the site of numerous civic gatherings. During the time of its demolition, the Town of Tomorrow Plans were calling for large tracts of land to be cleared in the city hall area to make way for, among many things, a new civic auditorium that could be used for large gatherings by the community. A few had suggested reusing the armory, those ideas that received scant attention at the time. The proposed civic center was never built, unless one considers Center City, described as a skating rink/civic center, the realization of that idea. In 1936, Schenectady’s third State Armory was constructed just southeast of the Van Curler Hotel (now Schenectady County Community College) on Washington Avenue. This new Art Deco/Tudor Revival edifice was designed by State Architect William Haugaard. In 1972, Mayor Frank Duci had suggested that it be converted into a civic center.<sup>2</sup> In December of 1994, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is still used by the National Guard.

By the end of 1947, the armory at the head of Crescent Park was gone. This cleared the way for Nott Terrace and Veeder Avenue to be widened and aligned with one another. The loss of the armory was not only a missed opportunity for the reuse of a great space, but it had previously helped frame and define the intersection where a number of important streets converge. Clearly it was not a building that was obsolete or deteriorated beyond repair but one which did not capture the imagination of Schenectady’s leaders at the time.



**Fig 7.01**

*Armory one marked the top of Crescent Park and the intersection of Nott Terrace, Veeder Avenue, Albany Street and State Street.*



**Fig 7.02**

*Site of armory as it exists today.*



**Fig 7.03**  
*Last days of the Plaza Theater.*



**Fig 7.04**  
*State Theater marquee.*



**Fig 7.05**  
*Site where State Theater once stood.*

### *Plaza Theater*

Less than 100 yards from the old armory stood one of Schenectady's great theaters, the Plaza. Built in 1931 it was active for a number of years. It provided part of the physical enclosure for Veterans Park and a number of active users for the park as well. The narrow front of the theater was part of the composition of buildings that gracefully followed the curve of State Street and stepped down the hill. After the theater closed, the city expressed concern that the owner was not maintaining the property. In 1964, after much pressure from the city, he removed the old theater. The site sat vacant for a number of years. Eventually many of the other buildings that had also been part of the composition of that street wall also were demolished. This cleared the way for the site to be used for parking. Forty-six years later, a new building is being constructed on the site where the theater and those other buildings once stood. During much of this time, the idea of a civic auditorium continued to be talked about, but it was usually tabled as too expensive or just not feasible.

### *State Theater*

In the late 1970s, the State Theater on the corner of State Street and Erie Boulevard was leveled to make way for more parking and perhaps to honor the parking lots that were being created across the street near the train station. In 1974, a group of architects and other professional that were part of the FOCUS Redevelopment Corporation "warned against demolition of the State Theater Arcade" noting that the privately owned theater-arcade provided one of the two remaining 'public assembly halls' in the city."<sup>3</sup> The marquee and the entrance on the corner of Erie and State survived and the marquee is used for advertising today. The theater itself is gone. It had extended back almost to Liberty Street and defined that corner. The buildings directly across from Liberty Street were removed around the same time to make way for a fast food hamburger establishment. Of the four corners that make up that intersection, the corner that now has a Burger King is the only one with a building.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

### *Union Station*

In 1967, it became official that Schenectady would no longer be a stop along the New York Central Railroad. Instead a new suburban station would be built along Karner Road in the Town of Colonie. In rendering its decision, the New York States Public Service Commission [PSC] stated that the expenditure of \$67,700 in needed repairs to the Union Station could not be justified given the low patronage and the fact that “the City of Schenectady appeared to be primarily concerned with the demolition of the existing building rather than having its use continued for passenger purposes.”<sup>4</sup> In 1970, the city agreed to buy the station from the Pennsylvania Central Transportation Company for \$20,000.<sup>5</sup> By July of 1971, cranes were in place working on the \$121,000 job of demolishing the station to make way for parking for downtown shoppers. Watching the action, a senior public works inspector for Schenectady called it “just an exciting moment, that’s all.”<sup>6</sup> By 1976, plans were underway to build a new Amtrak station at the same location.<sup>7</sup> The station that was built, a one story, flat roofed, nondescript structure, has aged gracefully enough to now be considered, and rightfully so, an eyesore in its own right. Plans are underway to replace it with a new station as part of the Western Gateway Transportation Center, an intermodal center that will feature a transportation museum. The new station takes its inspiration from the grandeur and classic style of the old, and may even include one of its original clocks.<sup>8</sup>



**Fig 7.08**

*Demolition of the Union Station to create parking.*



**Fig 7.06 (left)**

*Before...*

**Fig 7.07 (right)**

*...and after.*



**Fig 7.09**

*View along Erie Boulevard towards State Street. Bucci and Ellis Buildings are on the far corner.*



**Fig 7.10**

*After Bucci and Ellis Buildings have been removed.*

### *Ellis and Bucci Buildings*

In 1969, as the city was getting ready to take over ownership of the Union Station to raze it and provide more downtown parking, it was also trying to take ownership of the Ellis and Bucci buildings on the corner of State Street and Erie Boulevard. The city's intent at the time was to extend the parking lot from Liberty to State Street along Erie Boulevard and the retaining wall for the raised train tracks. It was estimated that these two buildings would provide an additional 17-20 spaces.<sup>9</sup> The Ellis Building was built around the time that the Erie Canal was dug through that part of the city in 1825 and was considered to be one of the last surviving buildings from the Canal era. From the beginning, public sentiment was against the proposal. One local attorney who opposed the demolition of the buildings argued that it would "increase the size of the hole on our main street," and pointed out that the buildings "form a façade that gives our main street the appearance of a street rather than wasteland."<sup>10</sup>

By 1974, the city's Urban Renewal Agency [URA] had taken title to the Ellis building and was now insisting that these buildings make way not for a parking lot, but a "modern office building of a shopping complex."<sup>11</sup> But the city still felt that it would need the Bucci building to create a parcel that would be large enough to entice development. The owner of the building, Earl Bucci, fought the city for years to prevent them from taking his property through eminent domain. The sentiment of the city was expressed by Councilmen Ray Vacca who said, "Fight them" which was followed by Councilmen Charles Seber who suggested that the city should "Demolish the building and let them take us to court." Councilmen Erwin Shapiro thought that even though the building had three tenants, it looked bad and that "a vacant lot would look a lot better."<sup>12</sup> A number of residents continued to fight to keep the historic Ellis building and sent in an application to have it listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Wayne Harvey, vice chairman of the Schenectady Bicentennial Commission pointed out the irony of a city being nominated as a National Bicentennial Community while seeking to tear down so many buildings that were linked closely to the city's history. He said visitors could be taken to the site of the old train station or the Ellis Building to view the plaques and the pictures of what was once there and the city could say, "Isn't the plaque interesting?" or "Are not the pictures great?" The visitor would then be told by the city, "We had the building but we tore it down."<sup>13</sup>

### Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

But the city council remained determined to get rid of these buildings. One exception was Councilman David Roberts who thought that the city should at least have a proposal for redeveloping the properties before rushing to demolish them. Later he stated that he had “been ‘besieged’ by phone calls from residents all urging preservation of the building.”<sup>14</sup> But after owning the building for a number of years and allowing it to deteriorate further, the city stated that they just didn’t have the money to sustain the building. After years of protests (and urging) from residents to save the building, Councilmen Erwin Shapiro admonished the “anti-demolitionists for ‘doing a great injustice to the city. When you let the city spend a great deal of money to buy the building knowing that it was to be demolished, you’ve done a great disservice to the majority of the city taxpayers, you should have come forth earlier.”<sup>15</sup>

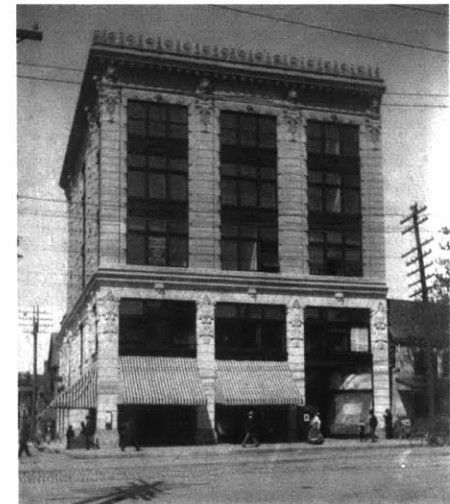
The demolition contractor choose the first day of Spring in 1975 to begin the job. On the following day the Schenectady Gazette featured a picture of the Ellis Building being torn down with the caption titled: “Super Spring Cleaning.” However, Earl Bucci continued to fight the city’s attempts to take over his property, eventually taking it to the state highest court. By 1976 the city was insisting that they needed both sites to attract a developer. The new plan: A rail transportation center with a 900 car parking garage. Soon after the city found a developer, the firm was indicted for fraud by the county, although the charges were later dropped. In the end, Bucci lost his court fight and the city started demolition in August 1978. Unfortunately the city was never able to interest a reputable developer in the site. Later modest landscaping improvements were later added—despite the mayor’s protests; in the end the buildings were sacrificed for less than fifteen parking spaces. Plans being drawn up now would place an office building on the site as part of the new Western Gateway Transportation Center.

#### *Lorrain Block*

At the turn of the century, one of the more impressive buildings along the commercial section of State Street was the Lorrain Block. Built in 1902 by Welton Stanfords it was named in honor of his 14 year-old daughter Lorraine Stanfords. The building served as a “symbol of prosperity” until it was torn down to make way for the Albany Savings Bank. The newspaper headline in June of 1972 expressed the sentiment



**Fig 7.11**  
*Demolition of the Ellis Building*



**Fig 7.12**  
*The Lorrain Block.*



**Fig 7.13**  
*View from Veterans Park towards  
Lorraine Block.*



**Fig 7.14**

*New bank which was built on the site of  
the Lorraine Block.*

that was often echoed by city leaders when buildings were being torn down: “Symbol of City’s Prosperity Falls Victim of Progress.” In contrast to the highly ornamented white stone of the Lorraine Block, the new bank has no exterior ornamentation or detail and is made of a dark brick. Moreover, the new bank features a blank wall along State Street. Adjacent to the Lorraine Block was the Strand Theater, located between Clinton and Barrett Streets. A number of stars such as Roy Rodgers had played there, but in 1969 the city acquired the property through tax foreclosure and by 1972 had turned it into a parking lot.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Nott Terrace High School*

In August 1962, the once ornate south building of Nott Terrace High School lay in partial ruins, as the demolition contractor filed a suit against the city for removing some of the salvageable items he was entitled to. The building was left in that condition and residents complained of the eyesore. It had been part of the 22 Block area urban renewal project and was being removed to allow for Eastern Avenue and Liberty Streets to be aligned. In 1974, the north building of the high school was torn down after the realtor who purchased the property had been unable to sell the site to a developer with a building on it and therefore “demolitions seemed to be the only answer.”<sup>17</sup> The site is now home to a Friendly’s Restaurant.

### Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Historic buildings of character and quality continue to be torn down in the downtown area today. Their demise is more often met by resistance, but the resolve of the city to get rid of buildings it feels are obsolete and not worth saving seems as strong as ever. At the end of 1999, a number of buildings on the corner of State Street and Broadway were leveled to make way for the new Department of Transportation Headquarters. Across Broadway from this site, the Hough Building, currently owned by the city, is quite likely to be the next target of the city and their busy demolition contractors.

#### *Center City*

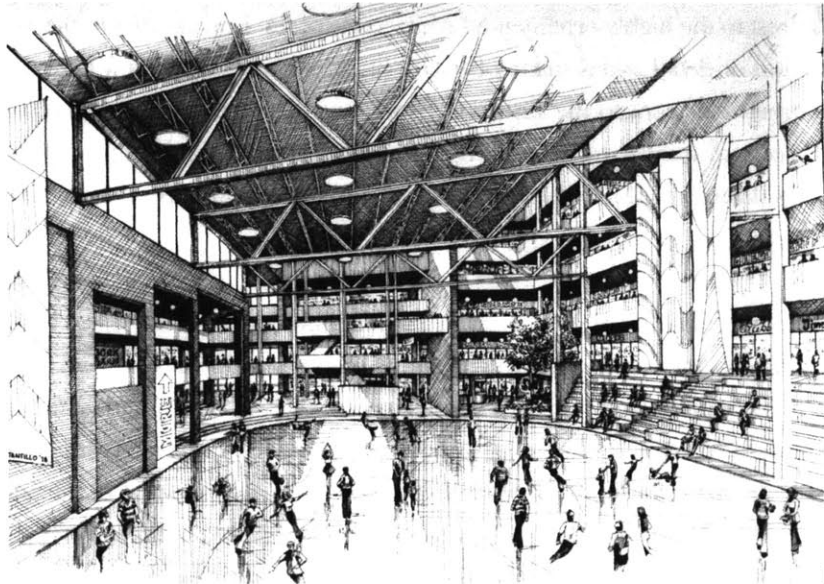
On June 24, 1979, the long awaited civic space that the city had been considering on and off since at least 1948 finally opened. It was part of a mall development that required the demolition of the Kresge and Grant buildings and was to included an ice-rink/exhibition hall as the centerpiece of a \$3.3 million federally funded project. One of the primary reasons for the interest in it was that the city had discovered that

**Fig 7.15 (left)**

*Architects rendering of Center City.*

**Fig 7.16 (right)**

*Center City opening Day.*







**Fig 7.17**  
*Corner of Jay and State Street before Krege's was removed for Center City.*



**Fig 7.18**  
*Same intersection today with Center City. Jay Street is now a pedestrian mall.*

federal money might be available for ice-skating rinks. In its latest incarnation it had been envisioned as a 3500 seat civic center with a regulation hockey rink that would serve as a public skating area as well as an exhibition hall where weekly events would bring thousands of visitors who would patronize the surrounding shops.<sup>18</sup> When the facility it was built in late 1979 with seating for only 500, the rink was not quite regulation size, the seats were only located along one side, the view from them was mostly blocked by large vertical supports and “the access in and out was terrible.”<sup>19</sup> The events that were promised to those who had rented the new commercial spaces never materialized and the construction of their commercial spaces made heating them prohibitively expensive. The entire facility was in financial trouble almost from day one, and much of the promised public skating was scrapped in order to try to recoup some of the money by renting it out to youth hockey leagues. “But the project,” one of the main components of the plant to revive the downtown, “was never intended to show a profit,” the city manager reminded people, apparently alluding to its success. “The object,” he continued, “was to draw people downtown where they will spend money in private businesses.”<sup>20</sup> In that respect it obviously failed.

Less than three months after opening with great fanfare and promise, the politicians were getting cold feet. Councilman Dom Gallo was saying that the facility was a “farce” and that he had been against it from the start while Councilman Jim Tedisco labeled the rink a “white elephant destined to bury the city in debt.”<sup>21</sup> By the end of its first year, the city was unsure whether they would be able to absorb the cost of the utility bills for the rink.

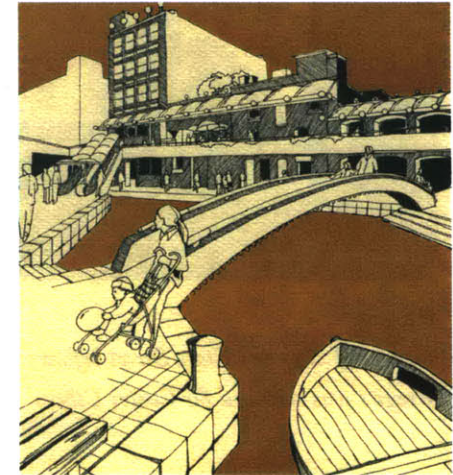
Recently, in a bid to save the city’s financially troubled white elephant, a committee recommended melting the ice and using the space for other purposes. It is now rented out to indoor youth soccer leagues. Most of the retail spaces in it have long since closed. The interior, which was never finished, receives little maintenance and never had the feel that the architects’ renderings had suggested. A \$200,000 climbing rock wall was just installed to compliment the rough look of the unfinished interior.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

### *Canal Square*

In 1978, it was reported that in two years “more than a full square block will have been converted from a decaying remnant of Schenectady’s better days into an exciting, unique, specialty shopping center with covered walkways, open terraces, a winding canal or lagoon, and twice as much retail shopping space as at present.”<sup>22</sup> Designed by the famous Washington architect, Arthur Cotton Moore, it was said that the “destiny of the downtown” was riding on its success.<sup>23</sup> The projects was envisioned as a great in-town shopping mall, which would connect a number of buildings on the 400 block of State Street from inside and create a pathway along the rear of the buildings.

Along the fronts, all the buildings were painted the same colors, dark brown with a mustard colored trim, to unify the block. An aluminum awning that stretched the length of the entire block allowed for only two distinguishing features to signify the uniqueness of each store—its name and the style of lettering. Other than that the unique architectural characteristics of each building were down-played. Along the rear of Canal Square, a miniature canal was to carry paddle boats and customers along the backs of the shops to the main courtyard or square. To access the shops from the parking lots that were in the back, customers would walk over small rounded foot bridges. During the winter, they became too slippery, and a few of



**Fig 7.19**  
*Rendering of Canal Square*



**Fig 7.20 (left)**  
*The 400 Block of the Canal Square shortly after renovations..*

**Fig 7.21 (right)**  
*Owners have gradually differentiated their buildings.*

## Chapter 7: Other Projects to Learn From

them had to be closed. The architect had failed to consider the harsh northeast climate. The canal itself was so poorly engineered it did not even last one season and began to leak into the basement storage areas of a number of buildings. A few years after the opening, the canal was filled in. Despite these flaws, the design got a number of awards including one from the Urban Development Action Grant [UDAG]. The day after Canal Square got its award, it declared bankruptcy.

Before it had even opened, the estimated cost to finish the project was over \$2 million over budget—A \$2 million loan for finishing the project from the Urban Development Corporation was rejected months before the scheduled opening. Supposedly the architect/developer had done an economic analysis, but none of those involved from Schenectady were ever permitted to see it. Within days of the opening, the bank had foreclosed on the developer, and few of the second floor spaces were ever completed. Today, there are only a few shops left in the entire development, and many of the infill buildings that were created, were so poorly constructed they will likely have to be demolished. A proposal to connect Canal Square with the Center City project by way of an enclosed above-ground bridge or pedestrian walkway was never carried out.<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion

The city's quest for removing buildings to create parking had meant the loss of a number of historic buildings within the downtown. The extra parking combined with the loss of character and opportunities for retail spaces was a combination that never brought the shoppers back to the downtown. The two major attempts at selected demolition and adaptive reuse—Canal Square and Center City were both essentially dead in the water before they began. Neither had the funding, or the construction management to allow them to be finished to a level that would create a place of character. But all of these projects show a lack of longer-range thinking on the part of the city and are filled with faulty assumptions and outright bad guesses. And few of the projects seem to show any attempt to connect them through a common vision of what the downtown should be. In the end, many buildings were lost through all of these projects, millions of dollars of taxpayer money was wasted, and little of value was ever created.



**Section III:**  
Schenectady's Future



## A Tale of Two Downtowns

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*Convention Centers, stadiums, aquariums, cultural centers, enclosed malls—these are about politics and development profitable for a few, not about developing local economies, enlivening downtowns, or stimulating revitalization. Downtowns compete for these headline-grabbing, budget-straining projects but overlook the actual, complex cities in which they sit.*

**Robert Brandes Gratz**, *Cities Back from the Edge*

*A fine-grain place is made up of small buildings, small open spaces, and small enterprises. These smaller parts can be more closely fitted to the varying activities of occupants, more completely under their control, and more easily sensed as connected to individual values and experiences, than are the larger features of a coarser grain.*

**Kevin Lynch**, *A Theory of Good City Form*

The ability of a downtown to fit the many needs of a diverse group of people is dependent on scale, activity, and time not overpowering place. “Coarse grain” as Lynch explains, “contributes to the prevalent fragmentation of life.”<sup>1</sup> Larger scale, single-use buildings create zones of predictability and control where the vital mix of activity and people required for lively cities is dampened. One of the conditions for generating diversity as Jane Jacobs explains, is that the place must “insure the presence of people who go outdoors on different schedules and are in the place for different purposes, but who are able to use many facilities in common.”<sup>2</sup> An older downtown with its varying widths of shop fronts and apartments or offices above is perfectly suited to this. It creates opportunities for a variety of enterprises and offers a constantly changing scene for the slow passing pedestrian. Larger scale buildings can offer this constant change of scenery as well, but to experience it requires one to be driving rather than walking by. For a downtown to be a

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

lively and exciting place that offers opportunities for residents and visitors alike, appropriate scale and use are paramount to its success. As scale increases and use becomes less diverse, the downtown is transformed into a different type—perhaps catering to one or two uses or a less diverse group of people. The decisions that cities make about the buildings, spaces, and uses in their downtown has a direct impact on the type of downtown they will likely become. By understanding the implications that every decision has on both the form and function of their downtown, cities can begin to revisit their objectives and determine if the path they are on is likely to meet the needs and fulfill the goals of the community.

### Downtowns in Transition

For every story of a downtown that seems tired, empty, and on its way out, there is a story of a downtown that was once lively and full of people, activities, and promise. For every story of a downtown that was near dead and somehow came back, there is a story of a downtown that people said never could. Many downtowns lie somewhere in between—not down and out, but not yet back either. These downtowns in transition are not always filled with landmark quality, unique, or high style building specimens, but are comprised of a buildings stock that is collectively one-of-a kind. Many of these buildings might be described in their current condition as Low Road. In *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built*, author Stuart Brand says of Low Road buildings that “Nobody cares what you do there” implying that these types of buildings offer more freedom than the High Road buildings.<sup>3</sup> In some ways, the high road buildings might be seen as the more high-style classical examples while the low road might include a number of variants, and more of a vernacular style. Unfortunately, the low road buildings are also seen as more expendable by many. The uses and stores in these downtowns tend to be low-end or bargain-type stores. The intensity of these low-end uses can also vary, with some considered low-intensity, others high-intensity.

For those downtowns that are described as having low-end, but high-intensity uses, they tend to have storefronts that are occupied, streets that are often crowded, and rents that are low. The uses range from *Dollar Stores*, to check cashing establishments to fast food joints—but typically not any franchises. The buildings



**Fig 8.01**

*Postcard of lower State Street in Schenectady showing narrow buildings.*



**Fig 8.02**

*Paterson, New Jersey, example of low-road but high intensity.*



## Chapter 8: A Tale of Two Downtowns

have not been restored, but are maintained at a level that usually does not invite further decay. The upper floors are a mix of transitional housing, some offices, and a number of vacant spaces. There is little middle- or upper-income investment in these areas other than absentee landlords. The building stock itself is usually stable, because each building is producing some income and has a use. But overall, the area only serves those at the lower-income levels. For other members of the larger community, it is not a place where they feel any sense of ownership and in fact tend to avoid, preferring to spend their time and money at the malls. But the current use of the downtown and its intensity remind people that the downtown is not obsolete. It is not a far stretch for many to imagine a mix of some new, more upscale uses being added and expanding the cross section of people being served. Despite their poor condition, these areas have retained more of their fine grain; this is vital if they are to become a lively mix of people and uses, all benefiting one another.

The low-use, low-intensity downtowns face more of an uphill battle in their transition to becoming lively active places than the high-intensity ones. The uses are often similar, but there are fewer of them that create interaction. In addition to the bargain basement collection of shops, these downtowns have streets lined with a combination of low-intensity uses or ones that do not create interaction, and storefronts that

**Fig 8.03**

*Buildings in Schenectady showing low-road, low intensity.*



## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

have no uses. The low-intensity uses include social service departments and outreach program for the region, drug rehab centers, lawyers, accountants, as well as a number of other professional offices which have no need for store-front exposure. The upper floors are marginally utilized, with a few offices, storage spaces, transitional housing, and many vacancies. The low-level of use and many vacancies provides no incentive for restoration or even basic maintenance of many of the structures. This deferred maintenance causes many buildings to deteriorate to the point where they must be torn down. For others, the low income generated by these properties often leads the owners to default on their property taxes or prompts them to employ bulldozers to lower their assessments. After the building is gone, and if there is a need, they may use it for parking. This demolition by neglect produces many holes in the street wall, and begins to break down the fine grain of buildings, the natural enclosure of spaces, and makes it impossible for a number of uses and interactions to occur.

Downtowns that are not intensely used and exist within a community that has a poor preservation attitude or track record are also easy targets for the wrecking ball. Further land assemblage, speculation, and large-scale single-use developments will continue to break down the fine grain. For the cities that exhibit these characteristics, there is often a tendency to look towards large-scale solutions to these incremental problems that plague their communities and threaten their downtowns. The big-money, quick-fix solutions, however tempting, often contribute to the problems and do little to help or strengthen the small-scale existing businesses that these projects are often portrayed as helping. The huge investments that are required for many of these large projects are not justified by their low returns.

Office buildings are often touted as “saviors” to the existing downtown businesses. But many of the new buildings are isolated and self-sufficient, despite their sometimes close proximity to the street. Their limited engagement with the street or surrounding buildings, lack of interaction with the public, and isolation from other businesses add little benefit to justify their presence. The new model of office building often has its own cafeteria or lunch area, ATM, postal service or mail room, and its own attached parking garage. There is little need for employees to leave the building and they tend to contribute little to the customer



**Fig 8.04**  
*Paterson, current conditions.*



**Fig 8.05**

*Paterson, imagining it with new life.*

base of downtown businesses. The scale of these buildings often overpowers anything else along the street. There is no reason for anyone who is not an employee to interact with the building; yet these buildings often take up thousands of linear feet of street frontage. For pedestrians, there is little of interest in passing them, and their length ensures a monotonous scene. At night, these buildings and the streets that border them become “dead zones”, creating unsafe areas that have no self-policing dynamics.

When these buildings are occupied by a single company, the situation can be even less attractive for the surrounding businesses and the downtown in general. At lunch time, if the employees leave the buildings, they often have so little time available that the only types of businesses they can support are those that can serve them in short order. For many of these companies, their presence and commitment to the community is ephemeral, as they are subject to mergers, buyouts, and bankruptcy, as well as sporadic venue shifts. When they do leave, the city has a much larger building and much larger problem on their hands than when a number of smaller companies leave. A single company in one large building is also much less beneficial to the downtown than a number of small companies spread throughout for a number of other reasons as well. Smaller businesses tend to form networks and be more supportive of other downtown businesses. Large-scale corporations are not likely to hire local accountants, buy office supplies from a local store, or use the services of local businesses in general.

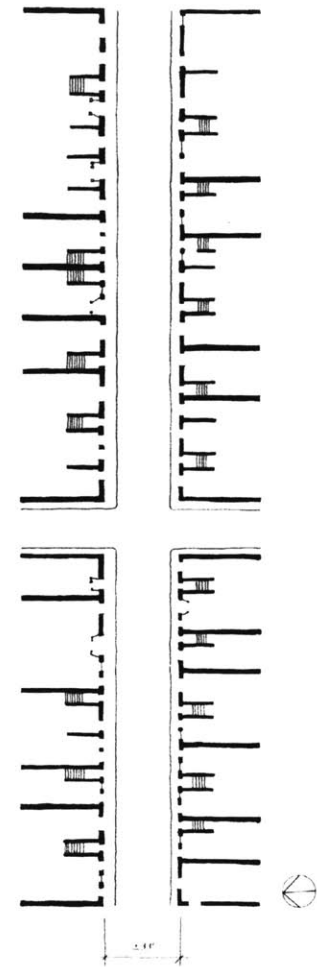
Convention centers have emerged as another answer to the “urban ills and the key to economic transformation.” The promise of thousands of hotel-room nights and millions of dollars poured into the local economy by conventioners, especially in the smaller markets, has many mayors salivating.

*Yet for all of the public dollars spent, few cities appear to have been saved by larger convention centers. For all the persistent rhetoric of new jobs, new spending, and ‘economic multipliers,’ much of the evidence suggests that convention centers deliver far less than promised. Indeed, in a number of cases, the expenditure of hundreds of millions of public dollars appears to have had almost no economic impact on individual communities.<sup>4</sup>*

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

A February 2000 study conducted by Quantum Dynamics for Schenectady's Metroplex Development Authority also pointed to the marginal returns on other big-ticket development projects. "Analysis shows that while large-scale development projects are beneficially regionally, local host communities give more than they get back in return. Further, given the invariably limited budgets available to localities for economic development expenditure, a dollar spent on an unproductive economic development project, is a dollar less than might otherwise be available for productive use."<sup>5</sup> In many cases, communities also waste millions in taxpayer money trying to lure these big development projects into their communities and fail in the end to attract them. Sometimes, however, not getting them, proves to be a better deal. Each one of these big-ticket projects typically requires additional public subsidies, infrastructure improvements, the demolition of existing buildings and the further loss of the fine grain that makes lively downtowns possible. Convention centers, aquariums, sports stadiums, civic centers are all uses that are introverted by nature. Once inside these buildings, there is little opportunity or reason to face the street. For those on the street, these buildings provide few amenities or reasons for interaction. These are facilities and their uses, when stretched out along the main commercial street destroy it. They have no need for such expanses of street level exposure other than to make a statement.

Traditionally, few buildings or single stores in the downtown occupied expansive stretches along the street. The exception was probably the department store. But it was broken into smaller segments, with multiple store windows displaying goods from any number of its departments. Along the street, they often had multiple entrances into the different departments. In effect, it provided a number of visual opportunities, and acted as a collection of many stores. Other large single uses such as theaters, occupied only short distances of the street front. Their marquees, however, provided information and excitement, the crowds provided activity, but the buildings actual use, provided no opportunity to enhance the liveliness of the street, and was therefore located away from the street, leaving just the narrow exposure of the entrance to connect with the public realm. Allan Jacobs in *Great Streets* points out that many doorways close together are one of the qualities of a great street. "The more doorways the better. The best streets," he says, "are replete with entryways, as little as 12 feet apart."<sup>6</sup>



**Fig 8.06**

*From Allan B. Jacobs book, Great Streets. Narrow buuidings and many doors that are close together.*

## Chapter 8: A Tale of Two Downtowns

The design, scale, and uses of buildings in the downtown and the uses that they border on can enhance or detract from the liveliness of streets and health of the downtown. Large-scale, single-use buildings are antithetical to providing an environment that encourages interaction and pedestrian activity. Large-scale developments are costly for smaller cities, and when they fail, they become costly mistakes. Whether a city wants its downtown to be filled with a lively mix of people spread throughout the day or just a noontime rush with complete emptiness after the workday depends largely on the types of buildings they design and the uses they allow. Large-scale buildings only serve to destroy the fine grain of a downtown. Their limited uses destroy the ability for people and activities to come together in vibrant spaces and in such a way that each person or use adds value to the other.



## Understanding Downtown's Direction

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*There is no such thing as perfect foresight, of course, so we can never plan infallibly, but we can face the urban future with modesty and an approach tempered by earlier successes and failures. In order to understand where we're going, it's necessary to know where we've been.*

**Witold Rybczynski**, *City Life: Urban Expectation in a New World*

Every project or initiative that Schenectady undertakes in the downtown, as well as the planning assumptions it makes, has a direct impact on the downtown's direction and future. Each decision can either alter or reinforce that path. In addition to knowing where it's been, it's important to know where the downtown is now. By understanding this and considering the ongoing projects and future proposals, it is possible to gain greater insight into the downtown's direction and begin to envision what it might become.

Like many neighborhoods, the downtown has no real boundaries. It contains a number of census tracts, political wards, and loosely defined districts. Bordering neighborhoods sometimes consider themselves part of the downtown. The limits of the downtown are constantly being defined and redefined according to the projects or initiatives being considered. Neither the 1924 or 1948 comprehensive plans for the city even refer to the downtown but instead to the Central Business District. The 1924 plan outlines the Central Business District as a circular zone with non-distinct or at least indistinguishable boundaries. The 1948 plan shows a general area but does not specify any boundaries. The boundaries specified for the 1999 Master Plan for Downtown Schenectady are listed as follows: Union Street on the North; Nott Terrace/Veeder Avenue/Millard Street/Broadway on the East; Interstate 890 on the South; and Washington Street [Avenue] on the West. Further this report states that "The study area generally conforms to the already designated Downtown Special Assessment District (DSAD) zone."<sup>1</sup>

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Typically, people refer to the downtown either in relation to a street, a section of a street, or the buildings or uses that border it. Lower Broadway typically is defined as that area of Broadway from State Street to Interstate 890. Lower Erie Boulevard is defined by the same two cross streets. The area around city hall is officially considered “Government Center” but is generally referred to as the city hall area. When people say they are going to Jay Street, they are usually referring to that section closed to vehicular traffic from Franklin Street to State Street. This area is also referred to in advertising as “Schenectady’s Biggest Little Street.” The urban renewal area has no name or prominent landmark building, but people often make references to the old Two Guys store. In fact many of the streets bordering it have so little character that many people don’t even know what they are. The downtown is further divided along State Street. The section from Erie Boulevard to the Mohawk River is considered to be lower State or the lower portion of the downtown. From Erie Boulevard to Veterans Park is referred to as the upper part of the downtown or upper State. Upper State Street can also refer to any portion of State Street from Nott Terrace to the Niskayuna town line. In addition to these areas, there are a number of industrial areas within the boundaries as defined for the 1999 Master Plan. Whenever people refer to downtown, its not always clear what they have in mind. But typically, the image most associated with the downtown is the area along the spine of State Street from the Mohawk River to Nott Terrace.

### Current Conditions

The image and the reality of this area have been deteriorating for years. Currently, as described in the previous chapter, much of the downtown could be considered to be low-road, or at least not filled with high-style examples of architecture. It might also be described as low-use, that is, the buildings are not being used in the best way to attract a diverse group of people. In addition, they are low-intensity because they do not create much interaction with the street.

The south side of the upper State Street section, also known as the 400 Block or the former Canal Square development, exhibits some of the worst and best conditions in the downtown. One of the most prominent buildings in this area, The Hough Building, located on the Corner of State Street and Broadway, is



**Fig 9.01**

*Schenectady City Hall, built by the firm of Mc Kim, Mead, and White.*



## Chapter 9: Understanding Downtowns Direction



**Fig 9.02**  
*Hough Building.*



**Fig 9.03**  
*Lower State Street.*

now completely empty, cordoned off by safety barricades, and targeted for demolition. The remaining storefronts along the block are mostly vacant or covered over. Two exceptions are a well-maintained, temple front, neoclassical bank and the jewel of the downtown, a recently restored theater designated a National Historic Landmark. The opposite side of the street is comprised of make-shift, in-fill construction—pizza parlors, sub shops, bargain stores, a pharmacy and the former Woolworth’s. Its original tile façade was recently covered over with an artificial stucco during renovation for its new occupant, the New York State Commission on the Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled.

Between Broadway and Erie Boulevard, still considered the upper section of State Street, there is only one surviving retail store, a center for alcoholic counseling for Schenectady County, an off-track betting parlor, an H & R Block office, a bank, and the Schenectady County Chamber of Commerce, plus a few holes where the Ellis and Bucci buildings once stood and where the entrance to Wall Street which led to the Union Station used to be. This block also suffers from two perceived edges which transverse State Street, interrupting the flow of pedestrian activity and the psychological connection with the lower parts of the street. One of these edges is the rust-colored overpass of the D & H railroad, which creates a dark stretch of sidewalk underneath. The other is created by the wide swath of pavement and busy automobile traffic along Erie Boulevard—dividing State Street and the downtown into a lower and upper section.

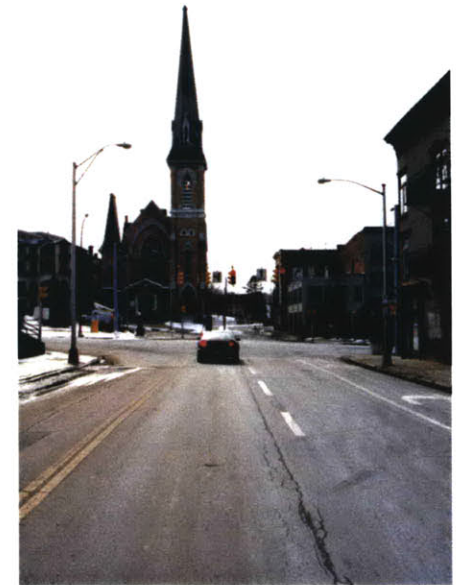
The lower section of State Street, although physically more intact and in better condition, is virtually empty above the ground floor except for apartments that are part of the adaptive reuse of the former Barney’s Department store. Storefronts along this stretch contain only a few retail spaces and one bank. Others are a blend of social services, accountants, lawyers, and state offices. The remaining storefronts are either bricked over, contain interior shades, or have uses that do not create any pedestrian interaction or excitement. There are also a number of holes or “missing teeth” in the street wall as well as a number of buildings that have been decapitated through the loss of their upper floors. One of these gaps has been partially filled in with a combination KFC/Pizza Hut, bordering on a city parking lot. Perhaps one of the most unique experiential qualities of this section of street in relation to the rest of the downtown is the

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

gentle curve of the street that begins near Erie Boulevard and continues until just past Church Street. This allows the pedestrian observer experience only a few façades at a time, as they gradually reveal themselves as the pedestrian walks along the street towards the Mohawk River. Where the curve straightens, the river and the bridge that takes State Street, or Route 5, across it to Scotia and beyond comes into view. To the left of this bridge is the historic Van Curler Hotel, now used as the Schenectady County Community College.

The section of State Street between Church Street and the Mohawk River, which also acts as the entrance to the downtown and the city from the west, contains a number of well-proportioned and appropriately-scaled buildings along one side including apartment buildings and the YMCA. On the opposite side, however, there is no sense of enclosure or continuity, with only a few buildings, a park, and a parking lot used to define an important arrival point and juncture where at least five streets converge. This is an area where the buildings and their uses should help celebrate the intersections and work to further reinforce and define the historic street pattern.

On the upper part of the downtown starting at Lafayette Street, State Street splits and curves around two sides of Veterans Park which runs up the hill until it meets Nott Terrace. One leg of State Street continues up the hill past Nott Terrace while the other leg becomes Albany Street, which also continues up the hill. Along one side of the park is Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, a few small buildings, the Schenectady County Court House, and the county office building. Directly across the park from the courthouse and church is the State Street Methodist Church and rectory on the corner of Lafayette and State Street as well as another church, Emanuel Baptist, near the corner of State Street and Nott Terrace—with nothing in between. This side of the street had been composed of a number of narrow buildings that respected and reinforced the curve of the street. Among those buildings was the Plaza Theater, built in 1931 and demolished in 1964. The head of the park near the intersections of State Street, Albany Street, Veeder Avenue and Nott Terrace was once marked with the imposing presence of the heavily castellated state armory. Razed in 1947, that terminus is now marked with a GOODYEAR Automotive Service Center and a small memorial honoring Revolutionary War hero General Casimir Pulaski.<sup>2</sup>



**Fig 9.04**  
*Church as focal point—southeast on Lafayette Street towards State Street at the foot of Veteran's Park.*

## Chapter 9: Understanding Downtowns Direction



**Fig 9.01**

*Jay Street pedestrian mall.*

Many other areas of the downtown mirror these characteristics and repeat the deficiencies. A number of the smaller streets have lost all identity and lack any sense of enclosure or dynamic, interactive uses. Most of the destruction in these other areas was undertaken to create additional surface parking. The short block of the Jay Street pedestrian mall is currently the only viable or very active retail section of the downtown. It is one of the few areas in the downtown where more than two retail establishments in a row can be found. For the most part, the older buildings, like most in the downtown, are rectangular in plan with their narrow end facing the street. There are a few single story structures, but most of the buildings are two to three floors in height. The upper floors are more actively used by a number of design firms and other professional offices, as well as a few apartments.

The visual terminus of the lower section of Erie Boulevard is the historic General Electric sign. Years ago, the sidewalks on either side of Erie Boulevard would have been crowded and active at lunch time, with thousands of employees filing into the downtown for lunch. And twice a day, one side of the street would be crammed with cars—going to the plant in the morning, and then leaving at the end of the day. Starting around 4:30 P.M. in those days, a line of cars, often four abreast, would stretch from State Street back to the GE plant. At its height in Schenectady, well over 50,000 people were employed at General Electric. Today, employment at the plant is probably under 5,000. Most of the larger retailers along this street, including a hardware store that had been in business for over a century, are now closed. The street with no cars to fill it and the sidewalks with no one to walk them seem overly wide and barren. There is no sense of street wall along this stretch, and the buildings that do line it are too small and too few to provide any sense of enclosure or meaning for this once important street.

The upper part of Erie Boulevard, although much narrower than the lower section, has also lost much of its street wall and its story—today it is largely defined by parking lots and single story, warehouse quality buildings. One of the character-defining qualities of this section of the street is a massive through-truss bridge that was originally built over the Erie Canal and now spans the street on a diagonal, carrying the railroad tracks over the road just northeast of Union Street. In a number of other places the tracks pass

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

over the streets in the immediate downtown. Along Erie Boulevard, the retaining wall of the raised tracks acts as an edge now that many of the buildings which once graced the street have been removed. In an effort to beautify the wall in the late 1990s, a group of volunteers painted it—covering over one of the city’s most historic informal messages or acts of graffiti. Along the wall, perhaps well over 20 years ago, someone had spray painted the message “Susan is a Pinhead.” It remained there for many years until the city painted over it. Soon after a new message appeared, “Susan is still a Pinhead.” Subsequently, that was covered over only to reappear with the new proclamation, “Susan remains to be a Pinhead.” This time the entire wall was covered using a graffiti resistant paint. Last year, *Pinhead Susan’s* reappeared as a new, upscale restaurant on the other side of the wall.

Soon another bit of history may “reappear.” In 1968, Schenectady ceased to be a stop on the passenger rail lines. A new station was built in the suburbs. By 1971, the fast moving city had torn down the majestic Union Station to make way for additional parking. By the mid-1970s, Schenectady was back on line and a new suburban-style station was built. Today the diminutive and already deteriorating Amtrak station (affectionately and appropriately referred to by some as Amshack) may go the way of the previous station, to make way for a grand new station—replete with details evocative of the old one.

Lower Broadway, between State Street and Interstate 890, was once lined with two and three story buildings with shops below. Currently, there are few physical reminders of that era. Along one side is a multi-level parking deck, a single story market now used as storage facility, a large city-owned parking lot, and a number of small businesses interspersed between more parking lots. Along the other side there are one or two small businesses, a public housing project, and a new office building. Built in the late 1980s, it was slated to be the first of three identical towers in that area. The corner of State and Broadway is undergoing change, with at least eight buildings having recently been torn down to make way for the state’s Department of Transportation [DOT] building. Broadway and Erie Boulevard run somewhat parallel, almost converging north of Union Street, but spreading farther apart as they move in the direction of Interstate 890. This land in between was once the point of convergence for a number of rail lines. There



**Fig 9.06**

*Pinhead Susans on the corner of Liberty Street and Broadway. The other three corners are parking lots.*



**Fig 9.07**

*Amshack.*

## Chapter 9: Understanding Downtowns Direction



**Fig 9.08**

*Buildings on Broadway and State before being razed for the DOT building.*



**Fig 9.09**

*Buildings on State Street and Broadway before the DOT.*

is no direct connection between Broadway and Erie Boulevard below State Street, restricting their use. Both streets could support more intense development.

### Current Projects

Despite the high vacancy rate in buildings throughout the downtown, two large office buildings are currently under construction. Although vacant land and more suitable parcels were readily available, the construction of one of these buildings has meant the demolition of at least eight buildings at one of the more prominent corners of the downtown. The other new building will occupy one of the more impressive sites in the downtown, across from the Schenectady County Courthouse and Veterans Park—one of the main entrances to the downtown. Both of these buildings will be occupied by single tenants. Those who lobbied for these sites have assumed that the office workers will add to the life of the streets and the financial benefit of the merchants in the downtown. Other projects that have been approved or are in the early planning stages include an intramodal transportation center and transportation museum, a redesigned streetscape for State Street from Nott Terrace to Erie Boulevard (including the re-introduction of on-street parking) and a multiplex theater with 12-30 screens and stadium-type seating.

One of the newest players in facilitating big development projects is the Schenectady Metroplex Development Authority. It was created by the State Legislature in 1998 as a public benefit corporation. Through this legislative action Metroplex have been given the power to “design, plan, finance, site, construct, administer, operate, manage, and maintain facilities within its service” as well as the powers of eminent domain. They are funded through county sales tax and receive “70 percent of one-half of one percent.” This generated approximately \$6.6 million in 1999 and \$6.5 million in 2000. Currently they are involved in four projects that they project will create 364 new jobs. Their total contribution towards these projects in the form of grants is over \$15 million. Initially many thought that through a tax revenue sharing that the downtown of Schenectady would be revitalized. But in fact, Metroplex’s territory has now doubled from “23.7 square miles to 56.9 square miles” and involves development in a number of more suburban areas. Metroplex’s mission is to “enhance the long-term economic vitality of life in Schenectady

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

County by cooperative, purposeful actions and investments within the Metroplex corridor with particular emphasis on downtown.”<sup>3</sup>

### *Department of Transportation [DOT] Building*

In an effort to help ailing cities like Schenectady, Governor George Pataki has been shifting a number of department headquarters out of Albany and into some of the surrounding communities. While the added presence of 300 or more workers may benefit the downtown, the move is typical of what many incorrectly refer to as job creation. In essence, most of these big development projects only entail job shifting or stealing from a nearby community. Few real jobs are added, vacancies are created in areas where the jobs came from, and often commute times are increased for the employees. Unless the lateral shift is substantial in distance, few will actually move to the new host community. In communities like Schenectady, there has been little emphasis on local economic development and little understanding of how local economies work. But perhaps the most counterproductive aspect of the DOT move is the siting of its new building.

The new building to be located on the corner of State Street and Broadway has already resulted in the demolition of a number of historic structures and the displacement of a few businesses. One of the buildings which was vacated a few years ago had previously been the headquarters for the Daily Gazette Newspaper. It had been at this location for over 100 years until it relocated to Maxon Road, where the city has created a new industrial zone along the city’s last undeveloped stretch of riverfront. The premise behind the location of the DOT building was that it would provide easy access to the city parking garage, which is located just south on Broadway and would benefit the few merchants that are left. Another site was available on the other side of the parking garage along Broadway. This site would also have required the razing of a few structures, but they are single story buildings and not integral to the street wall or character of the main downtown street.

The rationale often given for not choosing the other side of the parking garage was that the workers would never walk back up to State Street or into the downtown for lunch or shopping. This alternative site would



**Fig 9.10**  
*Former Gazette Building razed for DOT.*



**Fig 9.11**  
*Other potential site on the other side of the Broadway Garage.*



**Fig 9.12**

*Site now shovel ready, awaiting the DOT building.*

have put the DOT building across the street and just a few hundred feet down from the Broadway Center—part of a proposed office building complex designed to “revitalize the downtown of *the* city and create a series of building that *would* become the center of Schenectady.”<sup>4</sup> Originally the center was supposed to be composed of three 14-story office buildings, but only a single seven-story one was built. It is now home to the New York State Lottery, whose most famous advertising slogan was, “All you need is a dollar and a dream.” It is often tough, some authorities have argued, to encourage people to leave the Broadway Center and walk the hundred yards to State Street. A few hundred feet farther from the State Street, they felt, would have been disastrous. But it may also underscore the faulty assumption that these big office projects will have an enormous benefit on the downtown.

With the siting and program requirements for these types of projects as well as the dead spots they create, the city is in effect removing the opportunity and the potential for any lively street life they hope to create. In reality they are destroying the very essence and qualities which they say these projects will build on. It is analogous to paving over large portions of a park to accommodate all the people who come there to enjoy its natural setting. Given the fact that many of these new buildings are self-sufficient enough that people don’t have to leave, the current head of Schenectady Economic Development Corporation said he is not in favor of designing ground floor retail into them because he wants to force people out onto the streets. But if more of these types of buildings are developed along the main street, there will not be much left for these people to leave the buildings for.

The design of the new DOT building, although perhaps better than anything the city has seen in the last 20 years or more, missed out on a number of opportunities that both the site and the process had presented. The corner in a city represents choice and opportunity. It provides a choice in direction, and an opportunity and place for people moving in four directions to come together. Corners and intersections can be nodes of intense activity. The buildings that occupy them should celebrate this event. They should provide a visual clue that something more than a gap in the street wall is occurring. They should appear as if they are designed for that particular site, rooted to the ground, and understanding of their surroundings.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Moreover, the process could have provided an opportunity for the public to see all the designs that had been considered—not so they could vote on them, but to begin to imagine all the possibilities. When the City of Chicago began to plan for a new public library, they made a decision to televise the jury process where the different designs were explored, critiqued, and explained. By the time the winning design was announced, the public had greater insight into the process and felt a part of it. It educated many of them about architecture and design, and provided them with the tools to better understand the built environment around them. In the end, the design chosen for the Harold Washington Library embodied the presence, knowledge, and seriousness typical of the iconography of public libraries, while representing and being respectful of a style that is distinctly Chicago.

### *Mohawk Valley Physicians Health Care Plan, Inc. [MVP] Building*

The new MVP building will be located on State Street and Nott Terrace, across from Veterans Park and the County Court House and Office building. The move for MVP is less than one mile from the County's first court house, an historic Greek Revival structure at 108 Union Street. The new location and building will allow them to consolidate several offices and allows room for expansion. The building and siting are wrought with many of the same issues as the DOT building. But perhaps one of the most glaring problems is the design of the building and its total disregard for the site and the buildings and uses around it.

The site, which has been vacant for a number of years was the focus of a number of speculative projects and demolition proceeded on the assumptions that something big was about to happen. For many years the site was being readied for one of those “downtown saving” projects, a world trade center that never transpired. The scale and uses of the buildings that previously occupied this site helped to provide enclosure and uses which benefited the park. The buildings were narrow enough so that collectively they were able to follow the curve of the street. The design for the new building neither follows the curve nor steps up along the hill. It completely dwarfs State Street Methodist Church and rectory to one side, and disrespects it by placing its parking garage next to it. On the other end of the building, it completely obscures the view of the elegant rose window, tower and entire structure of the Emmanuel Baptist Church.



**Fig 9.13**  
*Celebrating the corner.*



**Fig 9.14**  
*Downplaying the corner.*



**Fig 9.15**

*Buildings along Veteran's Park following  
the curve of the road.*



The building's massing, scale and blockiness make it almost impossible for it to respond well to the slope of the site or the curve of the street. Because of its long exposure and the slope of the site, the first floor belt course at one end of the building correspond to the fifth floor of the parking deck at the other end. It does not communicate or respect the buildings across the street, offering horizontal concrete abutments and brick pilings of the eight-level parking garage as a counterpoint to the massive Corinthian order of the County Court House.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

While the design might be at home in any suburban corporate office park, it has almost no urban or pedestrian qualities to make it “at home” or help it contribute to the sense of place in Schenectady. There is no reason for anyone who does not work in this building to interact with or even walk by it. And despite its massive taxpayer-subsidized parking garage, (\$11.6 million) paid for through the Metroplex Development Authority, the parking garage will not be open to the public or be considered a shared lot to help local merchants because it is felt that MVP will grow quickly to occupy all 875 spaces.<sup>5</sup> Another assumption being made is that the MVP and DOT buildings will act as anchors, creating pedestrian movement in between. However, unlike mall anchors which give people a reason to walk between them and frequent the places in between, these are more likely to act as boat anchors—preventing movement. They give few reasons for the public to venture past them or even to them and will likely create more dead spots along the street, especially at night.

Large single use buildings such as the DOT building and the MVP building are also, in many ways, less adaptable than the smaller buildings that are more typical of a downtown. If in the future, the current occupants of either building leave, the space may be much harder to fill than smaller ones in the downtown. Unless another company with the same square footage requirements can be found, the buildings must be subdivided and rented to a number of smaller companies. In, *City Sense and City Design*, Kevin Lynch talks about the difference in adaptability between fine grain and coarse grain environments and explains that while the coarse grain may be more adaptable if the use remains the same, it is less so when they uses change. The same is true with the buildings that are not intricately mixed into the surroundings. “Although it may seem that complexity, interdependence, and high communication are signs of a fragile organism, while a simple, independent one is tough and adaptable, in fact the reverse is usually true.”<sup>6</sup>

### *The Direction*

Although the DOT and MVP buildings represent only two of the current projects, they are indicative of the types of development that the city is likely to pursue. The Mayor is hopeful that the Governor will soon announce the shift of another major department with additional state jobs to Schenectady.

## Chapter 9: Understanding Downtowns Direction



**Fig 9.16**  
*Rendering of MVP Building*



**Fig 9.17**  
*Courthouse across Veteran's Park from MVP.*

These projects illustrate in many ways that the city continues to sponsor big-ticket development projects with hype and fanfare—proclaiming how each one will save the city. While a number of sites would be more appropriate for this scale and type of development, the city stubbornly insists that they occur on or as close to the main spine of the downtown as possible. This will only further erode the fine grain of the downtown and result in the evaporation of many opportunities to strengthen and support the local economy. If the city is trying to create a downtown office park that offers little to its own community, and if it is only concerned with adding more people to the downtown during daytime hours, then it could be said that the city is on the right track. If, however, the goal is to create a more livable downtown with a mix of activities and users spread throughout the day, then the city needs to rethink its strategies. The city must begin to repair the breakdown in the grain of the city and the connections to the surrounding neighborhoods. By diverting some of the resources now spent on big projects, the city can begin to attract, retain, and enhance small businesses and expand the local economy. By focusing on projects and initiatives that add to the city's rich stories, the city can begin to build on its unique character, thereby, creating a marketable environment that will attract small and bigger businesses without the need for large taxpayer subsidies. In doing so it will add to the critical mass needed to sustain a number of projects that would benefit the community.



## New Initiatives for an Old Downtown

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*People will return to the cities. Our empty downtowns with their multistory buildings are the new frontier of residential housing. And minimal expansion along city peripheries at truly urban levels of density could accommodate levels of growth that would otherwise despoil miles of countryside as rural sprawl. Let cities be cities.*

**Terry Pindell**, *A Good Place to Live, America's Last Migration*

If the future of downtown Schenectady is to be one of liveliness and excitement, a vibrant local economy, a fine grain and healthy mix of old and new, and a place of opportunity for its citizens it must begin to reconsider the path it is on. If it does become this kind of a downtown—one that fits the needs of its own residents—others will invariably discover it too. But to get there, the community must first decide collectively, that is where they want to go. They must understand that Schenectady is a city with great character, a rich history, and a series of stories waiting to be told and enhanced. When it does, then strategies and objectives can be developed to help lift the downtown and put it on a new course that will lead towards realizing the community's goals and vision. But this will require a new collective mind-set, a different attitude about what constitutes progress, and overall, a new way of thinking about how to revitalize the downtown. Paraphrasing Roberta Brandes Gratz, author of *The Living City*, the city needs to *stop thinking big in such a small way and begin thinking small in a much bigger way.*

When Daniel Burnham said, “Make no little plans” it is doubtful that he meant that cities should only take on large projects or avoid small ones. Rather it might be taken to mean that whatever a city does, its projects, plans, or initiatives, should be part of a larger plan and a more comprehensive vision of the future. Every small step that a city takes in the direction of its story adds up, while even a few big missteps

## **Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place**

can prevent a city from ever being able to tell its story in a way that is interesting or captivating. This does not mean that big development projects should not happen, but they should not occur in isolation and should always be part of the larger vision and build towards the community goals. When new development destroys more character than it builds, and create areas of intense monotony, they cannot be considered progress. The city must at the same time seek to become a small business-friendly community. It must create residential opportunities in the downtown as well as strengthen those on the periphery. The city must be willing undertake low-cost approach or interim measures that may not have the immediate visual impact, publicity, or individual career advancement of large projects. The city must recognize and build on the assets as well as understand how to turn other liabilities into assets. And the city must begin to value good design, but at the same time understand the limits of design.

### **Immediate Low-cost Initiatives**

#### *Clean Windows and Active Storefronts*

There are a number of small low-cost projects that the city could begin to implement immediately to help improve its image and counter the look of its vacant downtown. While the City Mission has been doing a commendable job with its volunteers in trying to keep the downtown clean—sweeping sidewalks and picking up trash—more resources are needed to expand these types of efforts. The city or some coordinating organization should be working to ensure that every store window is as clean, interesting, and as well lit at night as possible. This would obviously require the cooperation of a number of active as well as absentee owners. Once they understand how this type of initiative would help make their buildings and spaces more marketable they might prove to be more receptive. Organizations, clubs, and businesses that have no street-level exposure could be encouraged to create displays in the vacant windows. At the same time, the sidewalks should be not only swept daily, but cleaned on a regular basis. Likewise, street cleaning in the area should be stepped up. Wherever feasible, anything covering the upper windows of the buildings should be removed and those windows cleaned on the inside and out.

## Chapter 10: New Initiatives for and Old Downtown

A number of cities have instituted similar programs as well as one that is sometimes referred to as a “lace curtain” initiative. As strange as the concept sounds, the idea is simple, the cost is low, but the effects can be dramatic. The idea is to put curtains or some other inexpensive treatment in the upper windows of the vacant buildings and turn on a few lights inside, at least for part of the night. This helps prevent the windows from looking like black holes during the day, and helps to create the appearance that the upper floors could support life. Together, these initiatives help to transform the downtown’s image and that of its older buildings. Instead of the downtown being seen as a collection of blank second and third floor windows and vacant store windows with faded signs announcing *going out of business* or *building for rent* or *building for sale*, the downtown would begin to exhibit signs of life, warmth, and become a visually more interesting environment. When people feel the downtown looks completely empty and lifeless, it is much harder to initiate programs to encourage people to live or take the risk of opening up a business there and perhaps even harder to get others to frequent the businesses that are already there.

### *Street Lighting*

Another low-cost step that could be taken immediately would be to improve the street lighting in the downtown. While a number of new historically accurate replicas of earlier street lighting standards have been installed with a whiter light source, most of the downtown is still illuminated by high-pressure sodium light which give off a depressing dull orange light. Where the city owns the lights, they should change over to a whiter source, either metal halide or an improved color high pressure sodium lamp; where the lights are owned and maintained by the local utility, they should be encouraged to do the same. This low-cost step would improve the nighttime image immediately, rather than waiting until all the standards have been replaced with the historic ones that the city has chosen.

### *Parking*

On-street parking should be introduced wherever it is currently not permitted and where traffic flow will allow. This will help existing businesses that are still in the downtown by encouraging more impulse buys, and enticing more people to come downtown. On some of the overly-wide, urban renewal era streets such

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place



**Fig 10.01 (left)**

*Street pattern of downtown area.*

**Fig 10.02 (right)**

*Impact of parking lots to the integrity of the street pattern.*

as Franklin Street and others around city hall, diagonal parking should be considered. This parking adjustment would allow more cars to be accommodated per/linear foot of street front and help to narrow the road and slow vehicular traffic, while encouraging pedestrian traffic. This would also help the city determine which of the many individual surface parking lots are not operating to capacity and therefore might be candidates for redevelopment. Downtown streets that have become highways must be turned back into streets. It is vital that the streets not be given over completely to cars, however, they must not prohibit them either.

### *Interim Measures*

In examining the process that led to the elimination of parking on State Street in 1984 and the subsequent redesigns for it in the last few years, it is obvious that an opportunity to deal with a simple problem, using an almost zero-cost, interim solution was missed. Because the volume of traffic is not great enough to require two lanes, parking could have been permitted immediately for the cost of painting a few lines. It would have allowed the city to study and determine if that would justify a more costly long-term solution. This would have saved a number of businesses that have left or gone out of business since the study first began to advocate putting on street parking back. If this interim approach had been used in 1984—eliminating parking on a trial basis without reconfiguring the street, the city could have saved millions of dollars, and retained a viable retail street in the downtown. Unfortunately, the city then and now, has not realized



## Chapter 10: New Initiatives for and Old Downtown

the value of small projects and interim solutions and remains determined to apply the “big fix” to small and often simple problems.

### **Business Development**

#### *Thinking Small*

One of the shortcomings of Schenectady’s efforts in revitalizing the downtown over the past 50 years or more has been its lack of emphasis on retaining, expanding, or attracting small businesses. It is especially evident in light of some of the current initiatives where millions are being spent on attracting larger companies that are already in the region, while the smaller ones are often ignored. The Metroplex Development Authority recently spent \$2.45 million to move a regional headquarters of Time Warner Cable and its 276 jobs about ten miles, from Washington Avenue in Albany to a previously undeveloped site on High Bridge Road in Rotterdam, which is in Schenectady County. The site was described by Metroplex as “shovel ready and pre-approved for development.” A number of people wrote to the local newspaper and argued strongly that they felt it was a lateral move and would have no positive impact on Schenectady. Time Warner was already located in the region and Metroplex only projected that 30 new jobs would be created. It is unlikely that many of those employees will switch their residence to the city of Schenectady. Despite Metroplex’s own studies which suggest that these types of big development projects do little to help the host communities, they felt it was a justified use of taxpayer money. Part of their assumption was that having another Fortune 500 Company in Schenectady County would enhance the business community and that new growth from that company would likely come from Schenectady. Nonetheless, Metroplex funded over twenty percent of the total project cost for a company that needed a regional headquarters nearby anyway and certainly had the capacity to fund the entire project by itself. In addition, the project likely required costly infrastructure upgrades and the development of a new site; it created a vacancy at its former site, and failed to enhance the city’s downtown or bring new jobs to the region.

## **Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place**

If instead, Metroplex had used those resources to help small businesses, the benefit to the region and city could have been much greater. By investing \$2.5 million and giving \$50,000 to either relocate or develop 50 small companies or retail establishments with ten persons each, the city would have benefited with 500 new jobs. Businesses of this size would also be more likely to support the ones already in the downtown or provide a base for additional businesses. It would not have required any major public infrastructure improvements, and the city would have been more likely to gain some of the employees as residents. It would also be unlikely that the city would lose all these companies at once—as is often the case when there are only a few big companies rather than many small ones. (As has been the case General Electric and American Locomotive.) But as of yet, none of the development authorities, economic development corporations, or other entities that are involved in the downtown have recognized or targeted small businesses as an area or sector of the economy worth supporting.

### *Become the Leader in Small Business Development*

Schenectady is not alone in outspending its budget to lure big businesses into the city. Many of the cities and towns around Schenectady target the same big companies, wasting valuable taxpayer resources by competing for the same market segments rather than trying to identify one that is underserved. Schenectady could be the leader in the area of small business development. By creating an environment that is friendly towards them and one which encourages and facilitates their growth, the city would stand to benefit and get a better return on the taxpayer's investment. The buildings in the downtown could be adaptively reused—preserving and enriching the built environment rather than degrading it and providing a unique place which suburban locations would not be able to match.

As many have noted, the city has a product to sell that it could market to attract small businesses. “With its low real estate cost, low housing costs, extensive pool of highly trained workers, diverse educational institutions and opportunities in town or nearby that have very good reputations, as well as a number of cultural and recreational amenities within a half hour to hours drive, the city has a lot to offer small businesses.” By attracting small businesses first, and creating a downtown that is more livable and convenient

## Chapter 10: New Initiatives for and Old Downtown

for its residents, the city would have an easier time attracting bigger businesses down the road. Those businesses are currently not attracted to the downtown because of its condition and the problems that it presents them in terms of recruiting and retaining workers. As one business owner noted, “The downtown currently has no sex-appeal. While there is certainly potential, big companies don’t buy potential, they buy the sure thing.” There are a number of other communities that have much more to offer in terms of that than Schenectady, therefore, the only thing the city can offer big businesses is money. To do this, the city will have to outspend their rivals to overcome its current sex-appeal deficit. “Rather than go after companies that you have to bribe, the city should look at those companies that will actually appreciate what the city has to offer them” Those businesses in the long run will likely be more loyal and add more of value to the community. They will also create an atmosphere that will help to attract other businesses. But until the city realizes that it must stop “going after the big fish using the wrong bait,” it will continue to waste taxpayer money, create little of interest, and miss out on a golden opportunity to build a diversified economic base.<sup>1</sup>

### **Residential Opportunities**

#### *Create Housing Above Stores*

Many of the organizations working on issues of downtown revitalization or redevelopment recognize the need for a density of nearby residents to help support the downtown. But typically they have looked at the issue from a more zonal philosophy than a fine grained one. Few have strongly endorsed housing mixed into the downtown and many continue to envision the downtown in small zones with arts and entertainment in one area, professional offices in another, and perhaps residential on the outskirts. The problem with relying on the residential population just outside the downtown is that the downtown is for the most part isolated from its surrounding neighborhoods. This makes it difficult to encourage nearby residents to come into the downtown, especially when they are confronted with so many hard edges that must be overcome in order to get there. Many of these are a manifestation of urban renewal projects which created wide, treeless streets with no active uses along them and acres of barren parking lots that leave the nearby streets undefined. The city must therefore begin to introduce housing into the downtown and

## **Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place**

repair the fine grain and life of the periphery if it hopes to reconnect the downtown with the surrounding neighborhoods. Adding trees along parking lot-bordered streets will probably not create corridors of great interest pulling pedestrians into the downtown.

### *Add Residential Early in the Process*

In 1999, a collaborative study of the downtown was conducted by Hunter Interests Incorporated, an urban economics, finance and real estate development firm from Maryland; Sasaki Associates of Watertown, Massachusetts; O.R. George & Associates of Silver Spring, Maryland; and Synthesis Architects of Schenectady. Out of this came a master plan for the downtown and a set of design guidelines for the downtown as well. While the Hunter Downtown Master Plan for Schenectady does emphasize the need for housing in the downtown, the report recommends that housing be considered in the latter stages of development. But if the city is considering expanding the retail and business environment of the downtown, housing should be addressed in the early stages. Residential relocation for most is much easier and less involved than major business relocations—therefore housing could be implemented rather quickly. In addition, retailers and other service establishments tend to follow the residential population rather than the other way around. Certainly the city should have learned this lesson. In the early 1950s, as people began to move out to the suburbs they were not moving to locate near the new shopping centers; rather the shopping centers were moving to locate near the new residential developments.

### *Encourage a Mix*

As the city begins to consider downtown housing, it is important that it seeks to create a mix of people and not just rely or expect to suddenly have all the young professionals move there. A residential population that is not diversified would do little to stimulate the mix of businesses that will attract others. Rather than target that segment of the population that every other downtown is targeting, perhaps the city could begin by considering what segments of the general population are not being well served within the community and would benefit most from the convenience of a downtown location. Within the city, there is a large segment of the population who as they retire, begin to look for a living situation that does not require the

## Chapter 10: New Initiatives for and Old Downtown

upkeep of the older homes found in most of Schenectady's neighborhoods. For many of these people, the choices are limited to situations such as the condominium developments outside city. But if the downtown began to be seen as a safe, clean, and more active place to live, many retired couples and individuals might trade the isolation of the suburban developments for more urban settings. This would also greatly benefit the downtown, creating a density of people whose schedules are not as regimented as many of the people who work downtown. In addition, these people would patronize a number of businesses that cannot be supported just by the office lunch crowd. And while some seem to think the downtown should be targeting one specific age group, the reality is that the needs of different age groups are not that different. The presence of more people of retirement age would help support a number of businesses that younger people need too. For the downtown to survive it must pursue a healthy mix.

### *Student Housing*

Another demographic segment of the population that would benefit from living downtown is the local college students and others in that age group. If there are enough bargains in the downtown, this group will begin to fill them. Like retirees, this group also has a more flexible and off-hours schedule than those working full-time. Not only would these two groups be served by decent downtown housing, but the downtown would benefit from their presence in the mix—more than if it was filled with just the 20-40 year-old professionals that many in the city hope to attract. The reason for this is that as a group the young professional would offer no more support to the daytime businesses than the office workers. But by starting with the senior and student populations—those with more flexible schedules—some of the basic enterprises that most find vital to have nearby would have the core support needed to be in business. Those businesses would make the area more attractive to the younger professionals, who together with the college-age group, would be able to begin to support a local night club, bar, or restaurant scene. As all of these groups in varied ways contribute to the downtown, it would become a more enticing place to visit those people who don't live there. This influx of people that do not live in the downtown or even the city, added to those that do, would contribute towards creating an environment that is dynamic and exciting—one able to meet the needs of a diverse group of people and enterprises.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

### Recognizing Assets

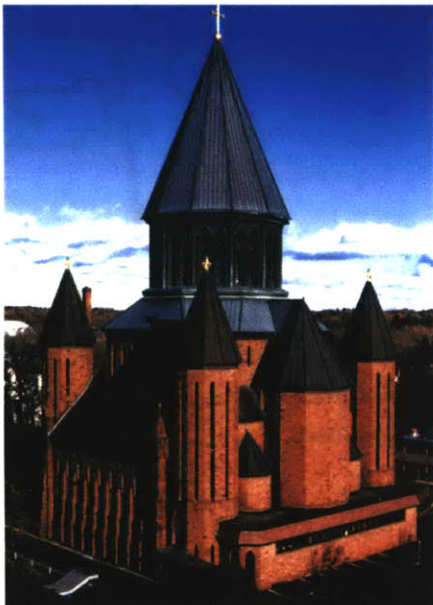
#### *Missed Opportunities*

Over the years there have been a number of public and private developments (such as the museum and senior housing) that have been pushed to the outside of the downtown rather than being pulled into it. The city is then left with trying to devise ways to bring the users of these developments into the downtown to add to the critical mass that is needed to support the businesses and services there. Many of these were not seen as opportunities to strengthen the downtown and therefore were not seized upon. One example is the Schaefer Heights senior housing tower that was built at the corner of Nott Terrace and Eastern Avenue. This location, just east of the 22 Block urban renewal area, effectively prohibits any of its residents from walking downtown even though it is only a few blocks away. Nott Terrace, through its street widening and lack of on street parking (which would act as a buffer), has become a barrier or another edge rather than a seam pulling the two sides together. Combined with the lack of any street trees, the breakdown of its fine grain uses and buildings, and the long expanses of parking lots that border the street, it has not become the type of thoroughfare that anyone would want to walk along to get to the downtown. And although Nott Terrace and Schaefer Heights are located on a public bus route, residents have to cross five lanes of traffic if they wanted to take a bus downtown. None of them seem willing to take that chance. While many of the seniors have their own cars, the center schedules weekly trips to the supermarkets and nearby shopping malls. No rides, however, are offered into the downtown.

Originally Schaefer Heights was supposed to be completely self-sufficient with the first three floors occupied by commercial spaces that would fulfill the residents' needs. It would have amenities such as a grocery store, hairdressers, doctor's offices, and a number of other establishments that would have benefited the residents, the same type of services that a typical downtown would offer. Despite the fact that the building has 118 apartment units, it never had enough density to support those commercial uses. More of the commercial spaces are rented, for typical office type uses, and are not incidental or beneficial to the residents' needs.<sup>2</sup> They are, however, the types of businesses that would be welcome in the downtown and perhaps create more spin-off benefits by being located there.



**Fig 10.03**  
*Loss of church as focal point.*



**Fig 10.04**  
*View from focal point blocking building.*

*Loss of Focal Point*

The additional three floors, which the developers of Schaefer Heights insisted were needed for the commercial spaces, added to the overall height and bulk of this already unsightly and poorly constructed residential tower. It now completely obstructs the view of one of the city’s most recognizable landmarks—Saint John the Evangelist Church—from the other end of Nott Terrace. At the same time, the city and *Schenectady 2000*, a largely volunteer group, have been seeking ways to improve the entrances to the city and the downtown and enhance many of the treeless, edgeless streets. The impetus of this initiative came partially from the President of Union College who had been trying to improve the routes that prospective students would use in coming to visit the campus. Prior to the construction of this residential tower, the church was as a focal point or terminus from the end of Nott Terrace near the top of the State Street hill. As prospective student coming in from Interstate 890 made their way along Broadway and up Veeder Avenue, the church would have come into view as they reached the top of Nott Terrace. Despite the fact the church is not located at the far end of the road, it had been still a focal point because the bend in Nott Terrace put it directly in line from that point. Once they passed the bend in Nott Terrace going towards Union College, the focal point would become the famous “Blue Gates” of the campus.

If the 118 residential apartment units had been located in the downtown instead, it would have been beneficial to the residents as well as downtown merchants. It might have spurred even more housing to meet the needs of this largely ignored demographic segment. It would have also preserved a view corridor of one of the distinct, character defining landmarks in the city. In addition, the commercial spaces that were inserted into the tower would be better served in the downtown and add to the mix of businesses there. Unfortunately, then and now, any new construction in or near the downtown is viewed as progress, regardless of how bad the siting of the building is for its users or how much it dishonors the public realm.

**Turning Liabilities into Assets**

Schenectady needs to be able to envision some of its current liabilities as potential assets. One way to do this is to examine and determine which of the current liabilities could benefit from one another, and

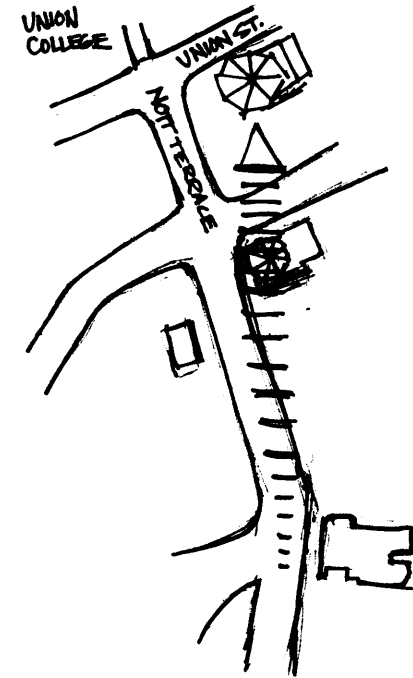
## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

through this mutual benefit, be turned into assets. To do this often requires “thinking outside the box” and developing unlikely coalitions or partnerships. In Paterson, New Jersey, a few liabilities have been combined in such a way as to begin to improve the school system and at the same time revitalize the downtown.

### *Bringing Communities and Schools Together*

The public schools in Paterson were facing overcrowding and an overall decline in the standards of the schools while at the same time their downtown was undervalued, underutilized and in need of revitalization. With the help of MIT Professor Roy Strickland and a group of MIT students, a series of workshops began to envision ways to integrate the schools into the community. The concept was entitled *Designing a City of Learning* and it involved developing a number of smaller subject-focused academies in the downtown and utilizing existing resources such as libraries and local gyms, rather than duplicating them.

Inherent in the concept for designing a *City of Learning* was the idea that the physical integration of smaller schools and academies into existing and underutilized buildings in the downtown would be a major catalyst in the areas revitalization. Integral to this concept was the creation of a partnership between schools and community—allowing students to become part of the process and enabling them to be “agents in their own city’s renewal.” Beyond the physical integration, this concept sought to develop and suggest ways to create curricular linkages between schools and community. Vital to this concept was the idea that students should not just be studying the world around them, but should be involved in improving it. By integrating the learning into the “real world,” it was believed that students would become valuable contributors to their communities, and gain a sense of empowerment by knowing that through participation, they could in fact affect change. Furthermore, through this community outreach approach, the students would be exposed to a number of different skills, trades, careers, and educational opportunities. They would inevitably become more informed and respectful citizens of the city, perhaps even one day returning to work for or in the city or school system in a more professional capacity.



**Fig 10.05**

*Although the church is not at the end of Nott Terrace, the bend in the road puts it directly in view from Nott Terrace and State Street.*



## Chapter 10: New Initiatives for and Old Downtown

The built and natural environment around Schenectady, like Paterson, holds an infinite number of lessons and opportunities for learning. Much of what students are expected to learn in a classroom or a book is all around them—but often outside the confines of the school building. By experiencing and interacting with their environment, the lessons they learn would be much more real and meaningful—as well as long lasting.

Within Schenectady's downtown, a number of these satellite-type schools or academies could be developed around issues of preservation, planning and design, environmental issues, or even around careers in fields such as hotel management and culinary arts. The programs could be linked to colleges in the area as well as businesses and professional firms engaged in these fields. By reusing some of the existing building stock in the downtown, and taking advantage of the public library and other resources, these academies would not need substantial buildings or facilities other than classrooms, space for studios, and computer or science labs.

Students within a planning type program might explore many of the initiatives behind a National Trust for Historic Preservations Main Street Program which could be implemented in the downtown. Students would add to the volunteer force of such a program, and would likely engage the professionals in a number of thought provoking ideas, as they are typically untainted by what others say *will never work*. They would bring a fresh perspective to the process, but more importantly Schenectady would be involving a generation in the downtown that otherwise would have little or no connection to it.

### Design

#### *Raising the Standards*

For many years, the quality or aesthetics of design were not primary considerations for commercial buildings that were being developed within the downtown or even within the city limits for that matter. When buildings such as the Broadway Center, Schaefer Heights, or the Summit Towers were built, many were not exactly excited by their designs. However, they were just glad to see something going up after the long period of buildings coming down. Today people are more likely to look at the new MVP building and

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

actually say things like *How did that ever get approved?* or *Doesn't the city have any guidelines for design?* Even the mayor feels that design is important and that he will be judged by some of the buildings that are built during his administration. The city does have design guidelines in place, although they are only used as recommendations and have no real “teeth” or power.

The design guidelines were developed by Sasaki and Associates as part of the *Hunter Master Plan for Downtown Schenectady* that was completed in 1999. With regard to Veterans Park and the spaces around it, such as the MVP site, the guidelines recommend establishing a continuous street wall. In addition it suggest that buildings should be “appropriately scaled” and that designs should avoid “excessive setbacks” and have “active ground floor uses.” In addition the design guidelines recommend that when parking garages front the street they should be “designed to integrate into the street wall. They should have facades that relate to the scale, proportion, and character of the surrounding buildings.” It is clear from the design of the new MVP building that either the design/build team did not have access to the design guidelines or chose to ignore them. About the only condition that they partially met was making the parking garage relate to the surrounding buildings, but that could be because the entire MVP building has the characteristics and intimacy of a parking garage.

### *Guidelines and Performance Expectations*

Despite these setbacks, the design guidelines will hopefully contribute to making the quality and characteristics of design part of the discussion when new buildings are being planned. But the design guidelines would have more impact and insure better outcomes if they were expanded to include performance expectations rather than the “one size fits all” approach. It is not enough to say for instance, that “Street trees should be planted in pairs, with each tree in the pair planted fifteen feet apart; each pair of trees should be planted thirty feet from the next pair. The trees should be ornamental and yet dense enough to provide a visual barrier between the road and sidewalks which may then be perceived as separate pedestrian streets.” The implications of guidelines such as that must be better understood to ensure that it conforms with the performance that is expected or desired for the trees in relation to the buildings, shop



**Fig 10.06**

*Buildings built to the edge of lot line or the “build-to-line” and still appearing inviting and allowing for penetrability.*



**Fig 10.07**

*Bank built to the build line, but the effect degrades more than it adds to the street.*



**Fig 10.08**  
*The former Union Station.*



**Fig 10.09**  
*Rendering of the proposed Western Gateway Transportation Center, celebrating the present and honoring the past.*

owners, pedestrians, and those residing or working on the upper floors. Historically streets such as State Street were lined with majestic Elms which grew tall and somewhat narrow, were open enough to filter sunlight and still provide shade. They also provided an “umbrella” or ceiling for the street, could be trimmed so that lower branches did not obstruct the views of the shops or some of the upper floors, and helped prevent excessive upward spill of light from the ornamental post-top street lights. The recommendation in the guidelines to plant dense ornamental trees along streets such as State Street if followed may actually have effects that were not intended or desirable. They would obstruct the view of the shops and signs from the street and provide only minimal shade. Their dense outward growth would interfere with the function of the street, they trees would block the downward light from a 20-22 foot tall post-top street light standard, and they would prohibit the view of the sidewalk from the upper floors. In addition, their stunted shapes are perhaps less interesting in terms of sculptural quality than real street trees are. Given the many months that the trees go without leaves, this should be an important consideration. If they are dense enough to provide a barrier between the sidewalk and the street it would also make viewing the shops and activities across the street more difficult.

As critical as good design is to the appearance and character of the downtown, design cannot do everything. When good designs are combined with a bad program, such as a single use office building with no ground floor activity, then the effort is less worthwhile and any positive effect on the liveliness of the downtown environment is severely muted. The downtown might be thought of as great theater that relies on audience participation. No matter how good the design or breathtaking the stage set, if the show is boring, the audience will not stay.

#### Proposed Project

##### *A New Chapter in Schenectady’s Transportation and Manufacturing Story*

One of the most promising big projects that is being envisioned is the creation of an intermodal transportation center where long distance buses, trains, taxis, and local buses will come together. It is a project that has the potential for many value-added benefits. This is a project that would serve the people of

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Schenectady and some of the outlying areas, as well as some people from much farther. The combined location and mix of uses will invariably create cross-benefits, as people who come in on the train are able to transfer to a bus and perhaps patronize nearby shops during their wait. It is an idea that has been a long time in coming. The idea of bringing together buses and trains in a concentrated location was advocated in the 1948 Schenectady Plan. But the buses ended up on lower State Street, the trains stopped coming for a while, and the majestic Union Station was lost.

The design of the new station takes many of the elements and imagery of the old station and combines them in a fresh new way that creates a sense of importance and dignity, without being a copy of the old. It also has the potential to greatly enhance an entrance to the city which is currently as degraded and unmarked as is possible. This new station not only celebrates the trains which arrive at the city throughout the day, but it celebrates the importance the railroad has had on the community and its development. It serves to tell part of the city's story, and although it does not undo the mistakes of the past, it could begin to show that the city has at least learned from one of them.

The addition of the transportation museum could help to illustrate the role that transportation has played in the city's development as well as the city's role in the transportation of the country. Combined with the GE Hall of History, this center could play an exciting role in the education of many of the city's school children who know little of the city's development and the industries that made the city what it is—giving meaning to its motto: *The City That Lights and Hauls the World*. It would also help to improve and change the image that others have of the city. These are stories waiting to be told and brought back into the fabric of the downtown.

The Western Gateway Transportation Center by itself will not save the city, and if not planned and considered carefully may do more harm than good. Some of cities that have created intermodal centers, or at least areas where transfers from one form of transportation can be made to another, have created areas largely avoided by the rest of the community. The coming together of hundreds of people in a relatively

## Chapter 10: New Initiatives for and Old Downtown

small area does not guarantee liveliness or activity. If people are dumped into these areas with no opportunity to do anything while they wait, these areas will have no life, activity, or excitement. The plans for this center must accommodate food, entertainment, retail or other places that can serve these people during the varying lengths of stay.

All of these projects and initiatives must be part of an overall goal and long-range vision for the downtown and should help to tell the story of the downtown and the city that the community wants to tell. None of the projects by themselves will save the downtown. Together, all of them can contribute if they are part of an ongoing commitment to make the downtown an interesting and livable place that fulfills the needs of the community and the many outlying areas. If the projects and initiatives are done with the idea of telling and enhancing the story of the downtown and the city, such as the proposed transportation center does, then the projects will be that much more meaningful and worthwhile.



## Findings and Conclusions

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*There is magic to great streets. We are attracted to the best of them not because we have to go there but because we want to be there. The best are as joyful as they are utilitarian. They are entertaining and they are open to all. . . . They are symbols of a community and of its history; they represent a public memory. On a great street we are allowed to dream; to remember things that never have happened and to look forward to things that, maybe, never will.*

**Allan B. Jacobs, *Great Streets***

The research for this thesis has taken me through more than fifty years of Schenectady's planning and development history and allowed me to look into the process and problems of a number of major projects in the downtown. The retrospective view and the compressed time frame within which history can be viewed makes it possible to identify trends, anomalies, or common mistakes. For Schenectady, there are a number of mistakes that seem to be repeated in project after project and a number of themes and faulty assumptions that have continually plagued the planning process. But considering the interdisciplinary nature of the planning and the politically-charged environment in which it inevitably takes place, it is sometimes understandable how projects can get sidetracked and fail to meet their expectations. Furthermore, given the hundreds of decisions that must be made along the way and infinite number of variables as well as the sometimes unpredictable externalities, it is indeed often more surprising when a project actually turns out as planned. For Schenectady, projects in the downtown turning out as expected or delivering as promised has been one of the anomalies of the city's planning history. Schenectady's past efforts to revitalize the downtown have been filled with high expectations and poor results. Much of this stems from a lack of vision or imagination about what the downtown is and what it can be. The projects and initiatives that have been undertaken show little understanding of how to weave together the stories and fabric of the past and present, in such a way as to add to the value and richness to those of the future.

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

Since the late 1940s, Schenectady has shown a strong tradition of tearing down old buildings. This is typically done under the faulty assumptions that either the buildings are too old, obsolete, or just not reusable in any way, and that a site without buildings is somehow more appealing and enticing to developers. In many cases where this was done, development never materialized, while in others it did not happen as envisioned, or it happened as planned but in a way which runs counter to the needs of an intricately mixed community. This “rush to demolition” attitude has had a profound effect on the form of the city, its downtown, and the relationship of one area or neighborhood to the next. The loss of the fine grain of the downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods, both in the context of the buildings and their uses, has left the downtown isolated and the connections to it weak and uninviting. It has created a hole in the fabric of the city and an unnecessary gap in its story.

Many of the projects that have been built in the downtown are out of scale with their surroundings and tend to overpower rather than blend into the site. The massing and exposure of some of the new buildings as well as the large sites they occupy give them an expanse of street frontage that makes it impossible for them to fit into the context of the downtown. Few of them allow for the variations in use or the off-beat rhythm and syncopation in form that the rest of the downtown buildings exhibits. The overpowering single-uses of these buildings and their lack of ground floor space with any public purpose creates large areas where pedestrians have no reason to interact with the very private buildings or uses that border the public realm.

Over the past fifty years or more, the city has shown a marked tendency for the big projects that are almost always promoted as something that will save the downtown. Headlines and stories hail each new round of projects as the panacea for the downtown. Whether the public is swayed by the hype swirling around each one is difficult to determine. But the sheer repetition of lofty promises followed by the sobering realities of what gets built or often does not, probably does little to bolster the confidence and faith of the public in the future of the downtown. Likewise, it probably does little to enhance the image people outside the community hold of the city. The poor image of the city and its lack of a clear vision, keep many who might otherwise consider moving there or investing in its future from doing so.



## Findings and Conclusions

The cities of Lowell and Lawrence Massachusetts, two very similar post-industrial New England mill towns, have often been compared with each other. The story of Lowell has been one of success after success, while Lawrence has been the story of an incredibly long string of failures. The question is often raised, Why is one a success and the other a failure? The answers often point to things such as the quality, understanding and vision of dynamic leaders. They also point to opportunities and the ability to capitalize on them. With each failure in Lawrence, success becomes harder to achieve, while in Lowell success only seems to beget more success. For Lawrence, its inability to get things done only seems to push away critical outside investment and further limits its opportunities. Early on Lowell understood itself and the story it wanted to tell. It found creative reuses for old mills, created opportunities for learning, and embraced a new immigrant population that has added much to the character of the city. Lawrence meanwhile, has not discovered a story it can tell. As a city it does not yet know what it wants to be, except perhaps, Lowell.

Despite the failure of so many of Schenectady's big projects, the city still shows a marked reluctance to tackle the issues of the downtown from a more comprehensive street level approach. Inevitably, this would entail respecting the existing built environment and seeking creative ways to reuse building and spaces before rushing to tear them down. To be sure, this is not an easy approach. It does not usually grab headlines, it may not advance political careers, and it surely will not happen overnight. Yet it remains a strategy that a number of cities are using. It is one that lessens the burdens on the taxpayer, but often produces a greater benefit.

The story of Troy, New York has been one of a city that has shown great respect for the downtown and the architecture of the buildings there. People during the urban renewal days "literally stood in front of bulldozers to save some buildings...a culture of caring for the older properties that continues today." For Troy, the downtown remains the heart of the community and is intricately linked to the surrounding neighborhoods. The city's collective respect for the built environment has now led to the restoration of and enormous investment in buildings such as the Rice Building which is being reused as a high-technology incubator space for new companies, with ties to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute [RPI]. The city sees

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

it not just as the Rice Building but the intersection of two very important streets. It is a building which celebrates and honors that corner and respects and adds value to the buildings around it. The effect of that investment has spread. A number of other buildings were reused to create the Arts Center of the Capital Region, which brings in thousand of students each day. The character of the older buildings, as they are restored into first class office spaces is turning them into desirable business addresses. And the fine grain and small scale-uses which fits into the mix is making the environment of downtown Troy a desirable residential address as well. It is a city that recognizes its strength, and for Troy its “strength is the built environment.”<sup>1</sup>

Currently there is not a consensus among the many organizations or city departments in Schenectady about how to deal with or help new businesses that want to locate in the downtown or reuse the existing buildings. There does not seem to be any “one-stop” department or organization that can best handle this issue or help new businesses find a location that is both suitable to their needs and beneficial to the overall downtown environment. This lack of coordination leads to the placement of many businesses that do not require or even benefit from street level exposure in those prime spaces. These businesses add little to those areas and would perform a real service either by being located in second floor spaces or not being located on streets that have potential for becoming a more vibrant retail area.

Despite an understanding, at least in print, for the need to introduce housing into the downtown, there have been few initiatives over the years to encourage it. There are a few buildings such as the former Barney’s Department Store that have been adaptively reused as residential apartments. However, most of the upper floors of buildings in the downtown remain empty or house a largely unlawful group of citizens that do more to detract from the image of the downtown than add to it. Currently, many of those involved in the city’s planning still see the downtown as a primarily business area with some retail which would be supported, in part, by the residential neighborhoods surrounding the downtown.

It is astounding how many of the decisions made about major projects through the years were so deeply politically motivated. Rather than attack the problems of the city in a concrete way, the internal politics

## Findings and Conclusions

and workings of the city often serve to prop up projects that should never have gotten past the initial proposal stage, and bring down others that would be beneficial to the community. Too often projects and even the construction of new buildings have been undertaken based not on their benefit to the community, but on their benefit to private individuals, politicians, political parties or others who hold positions of power. For the most part, these have not provided a return for the public investment that has gone into them. The response by many has been to say *that's just politics or that happens everywhere*. But clearly it doesn't happen everywhere and a most other cities manage to spend more time and effort working towards community goals than obstructing progress for political or personal gain.

For many years the city has looked at its built environment as expendable and has failed to realize the benefits that can be gained by respecting its existing cultural resources. The city, however, has in general been a good steward for its own city hall, a National Historic Landmark designed by the firm of McKim, Mead and White. But it has yet to formulate policies or make decisions that would indicate to any potential investors that the city sees its downtown and the building in it as assets to build upon. In fact, many of its policies and decisions have done the opposite and encouraged disinvestment in the existing buildings and promoted parking lots over buildings. For over five years the city through its Industrial Development Agency [IDA] has owned the Hough Building on corner of State Street and Broadway. This building is one of the most prominent structures along that stretch of the downtown and is vital to defining and adding identity to that corner intersection. During the time this building has been under the city's control it has continued to deteriorate, and few if any measures have been taken to stabilize the structure. At the same time, the city has been advocating for new developments at that location which do not include a reuse of the Hough Building. Those who have been in control of this building have stated that the building is too deteriorated to be saved and should be demolished. While this may be the case at this point, it raises the question of whether the attitudes and actions of some have created a self-fulfilling prophecy. As one of those in power pointed out "We're really stuck with a town of a lot of crap buildings. They're not even historically interesting." Similar to the *planners-blight* of the urban renewal area, this *demolition by neglect* that is occurring will cause more of the fabric and fine grain of the downtown to be lost. Tearing

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

down the Hough Building and replacing it with something that looks just like it, as some have suggested, accomplishes very little and is an economically inefficient solution. Other recent proposals such as trying to save the façade of the Gazette building and connecting it to the new DOT building with glass atrium set back from it by 15 feet would have destroyed any context for the old building and would have taken the idea of the street as theater and the buildings as a stage set just a little too far.

### Conclusions

Perhaps one of the longest running themes over the last 50 years in Schenectady's attempts to "help" the downtown and ensure "progress" has been the idea that tearing down buildings and making empty sites is an enticement to developers. That approach was the impetus for this thesis and the inspiration for its title. In the 1950s, the newspapers reported that "A bare spot on the face of the city is the first part of a dream come true. Houses were banged down and piles of debris shoveled out of the way."<sup>2</sup> Planners and politicians began to speak of removing buildings to make the sites "shovel ready." Those words remain part of the vocabulary and are embedded in the philosophy of Schenectady's city planning today. During the urban renewal period hundreds of buildings and homes were destroyed, history was ignored, and the sense of place lost—all in the hopes that it would lead to a better downtown. And for years the sites sat empty...shovel ready and waiting. Developers were not lining up as expected and when they did, they were not delivering as promised. Today it is clear that this trend and the underlying assumptions—if the city can just acquire and remove more buildings, they will be able to make the sites more attractive to developers is still prevalent. The following is from the meeting minutes of the Metroplex Development Authority: "request for action from the committee regarding this project indicating funding is necessary to acquire a 'shovel ready' site to entice developers"<sup>3</sup> This was in November of 1999. Schenectady continues to see old buildings not as opportunities for reuse, rebirth or regeneration, but as shovel ready sites in the making. Meanwhile other cities are capitalizing and building on their existing stock of buildings and in the process beginning to uncover and build on their stories. William Holly Whyte argues that this not only creates better design, but when old buildings are seen as a means for revitalizing downtowns rather than an obstacle, the results are worth the effort:

## Findings and Conclusions

*It is significant that cities doing best by their downtowns are the ones doing best at historic preservation and reuse. Fine old buildings are worthwhile in their own right, but there is greater benefit involved. They provide discipline. Architects and planners like a blank slate. They usually do their best work, however, when they don't have one. When they have to work with impossible lot lines and bits and pieces of space, beloved old eyesores, irrational street layouts, and other such constraints, they frequently produce the best of their new designs—and the most neighborly.<sup>4</sup>*

Schenectady has spent the last fifty years or more continually trying to wipe the slate clean. In many cases the slate remains blank, and there are few ideas on how to fill it. Too often, when the slate is wiped clean, the story is also.

There are, however, a number of projects, proposals, and organization that are cause for some optimism. One of the most unusual organizations in the way it was created is the Metroplex Development Authority. Its has enough separation between politics and the business community to give it an opportunity to be supportive of projects based solely on how they will benefit the community in the long run. It has the capacity and the resources to take the lead in the effort to revitalize Schenectady's downtown. It also has a dynamic and competent leader who is not entrenched in one way of doing things but open to new ideas and a new way of thinking about the downtown. But the organization must begin to consider the findings of its own studies, and realize that *big development projects offer little to the host community*. If they begin to use their resources and the taxpayers money to promote small businesses, residential opportunities, and the reuse of buildings in the downtown, they will play an enormous part in changing the path of the city and in helping to spark a rebirth of the downtown.

One of the most important proposals currently being considered is the creation of a Business Improvement District [BID] that will help encourage and promote small business. If it is created and staffed with a full-time manager who will work to place new businesses in the downtown, it will be filling a role that no other organization or department in the city is taking care of. By undertaking an inventory of

## **Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place**

downtown buildings and spaces and entering them in a database that is tied in with the city's tax department and perhaps the County's Geographic Information System [GIS], BID could help to locate new businesses in ways which create synergistic relationships with nearby businesses. The success of BID and its ability to fill the gap of small business locations and other assistance is dependent on coordination with other city departments and organization working in the downtown. If it can begin to do this, BID will greatly enhance the ability and the efficacy of attracting and locating new small businesses.

One of the most promising projects, as outlined earlier is the Western Gateway Transportation Center. It will help the city to rediscover part of its past and begin to capitalize on the richness of its story. It is an example of what is possible when the city starts to consider the resources that are already within its borders and brings them together in a way that allows each one to build and gain value from the other. It is an example of a story that builds on both past mistakes and successes. It is a story of the past being used to create a link to the future.

The story of Schenectady's other transportation system, the Erie Canal, is also rich and full of possibility. It is a story that is waiting to be rediscovered and retold. And as with Providence's uncovering of its rivers, stories can become richer with age. Like a good storyteller, Providence has embellished and continues to add to its story in ways that make it more powerful and perhaps more meaningful each year. Its river and its connection with the city continue to get stronger. Its story is not just about the past, but about the present and the future.

Schenectady's is a story about canals and railroads. It is also the story about big industries, American Locomotive and General Electric. It is a city that is replete with stories about great ingenuity and enterprising people. It can be the story of city that discovered how to capitalize on a built environment in the downtown that was the manifestation of its two big industries, and use it to reinforce and attract hundreds of new small business.

## Findings and Conclusions

It is the story of a city that was burned and rebuilt. It is the story of a city that grew-up quickly and started to die more slowly. The stories it decides to tell as a community will determine whether it becomes a city forgotten, a city rebuilt, or one which has been reborn.<sup>5</sup> And as the city begins to retell, enhance, and embellish its story, it will become a city which raises hopes, builds on its history, and reinforces its own sense of place.





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## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

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### Chapter 1

- Figure 1.01 Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939  
Figure 1.02 Streetcar Suburbs  
Figure 1.03 Schenectady, A Pictorial History  
Figure 1.04 Yesterday's Tomorrows : Past Visions of the American Future  
Figure 1.05 American Dreamscape  
Figure 1.06 Efner History Research Center  
Figure 1.07 Efner History Research Center  
Figure 1.08 Providence Preservation Society  
Figure 1.09 Providence Preservation Society

### Chapter 2

- Figure 2.01 From Larry Hart Pictorial History of Schenectady  
Figure 2.02 From Private collection of Beth Spencer  
Figure 2.03 From Private collection of Beth Spencer  
Figure 2.04 © Chris Spencer, 2000  
Figure 2.05 Efner History Research Center  
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Figure 2.09 Efner History Research Center  
Figure 2.10 Daily Gazette  
Figure 2.11 Efner History Research Center  
Figure 2.12 Efner History Research Center

## Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place

### Chapter 13

- Figure 3.01 Hofstra University
- Figure 3.02 Las Vegas: The Great American Playground
- Figure 3.03 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 3.04 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 3.05 Efner History Research Center

### Chapter 4

- Figure 4.01 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 4.02 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 4.03 Schenectady Gazette
- Figure 4.04 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 4.05 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 4.06 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 4.07 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 4.08 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 4.09 Schenectady Gazette
- Figure 4.10 Union Star

### Chapter 5

- Figure 5.01 Chris Spencer
- Figure 5.02 Chris Spencer
- Figure 5.03 Chris Spencer
- Figure 5.04 Providence Preservation Society

## Illustration Credits

### Chapter 6

Figure 6.01	Union Star
Figure 6.02	Union Star
Figure 6.03	Union Star
Figure 6.04	Union Star
Figure 6.05	Schenectady 1924 Plan EHRC
Figure 6.06	1905 Atlas EHRC

### Chapter 7

Figure 7.01	Efner History Research Center
Figure 7.02	Chris Spencer
Figure 7.03	Tales of Old Schenectady, Vol I
Figure 7.04	Chris Spencer
Figure 7.05	Chris Spencer
Figure 7.06	Efner History Research Center
Figure 7.07	Efner History Research Center
Figure 7.08	Efner History Research Center
Figure 7.09	Efner History Research Center
Figure 7.10	Efner History Research Center
Figure 7.11	Tales of Old Schenectady, Voll
Figure 7.12	Efner History Research Center
Figure 7.13	Efner History Research Center
Figure 7.14	Chris Spencer
Figure 7.15	Schenectady Gazette
Figure 7.16	Schenectady Gazette
Figure 7.17	Efner History Research Center
Figure 7.18	Chris Spencer

## **Razing Hopes, History, and a Sense of Place**

- Figure 7.19 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 7.20 Power of Preservation
- Figure 7.21 Chris Spencer

## **Chapter 8**

- Figure 8.01 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 8.02 Chris Spencer
- Figure 8.03 Chris Spencer
- Figure 8.04 Chris Spencer
- Figure 8.05 Chris Spencer
- Figure 8.06 Great Streets

## **Chapter 9**

- Figure 9.01 Private Collection of Bob Sullivan
- Figure 9.02 Chris Spencer
- Figure 9.03 Chris Spencer
- Figure 9.04 Chris Spencer
- Figure 9.05 Mark Esposito
- Figure 9.06 Chris Spencer
- Figure 9.07 Chris Spencer
- Figure 9.08 Chris Spencer
- Figure 9.09 Chris Spencer
- Figure 9.10 Chris Spencer
- Figure 9.11 Chris Spencer
- Figure 9.12 Chris Spencer
- Figure 9.13 Efner History Research Center
- Figure 9.14 Chris Spencer

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Figure 9.15 Tales of Old Scehenctady, Vol I

Figure 9.16 BBL, site sign

Figure 9.17 Efner History Researc Center

### Chapter 10

Figure 10.01 Chris Spencer

Figure 10.02 Chris Spencer

Figure 10.03 Chris Spencer

Figure 10.04 Saint John the Evangelis Church

Figure 10.05 Mark Esposito

Figure 10.06 Mark Esposito

Figure 10.07 Chris Spencer

Figure 10.08 Efner History Research Center

Figure10.09 Hunter Maste Plan /Synthesis Architects