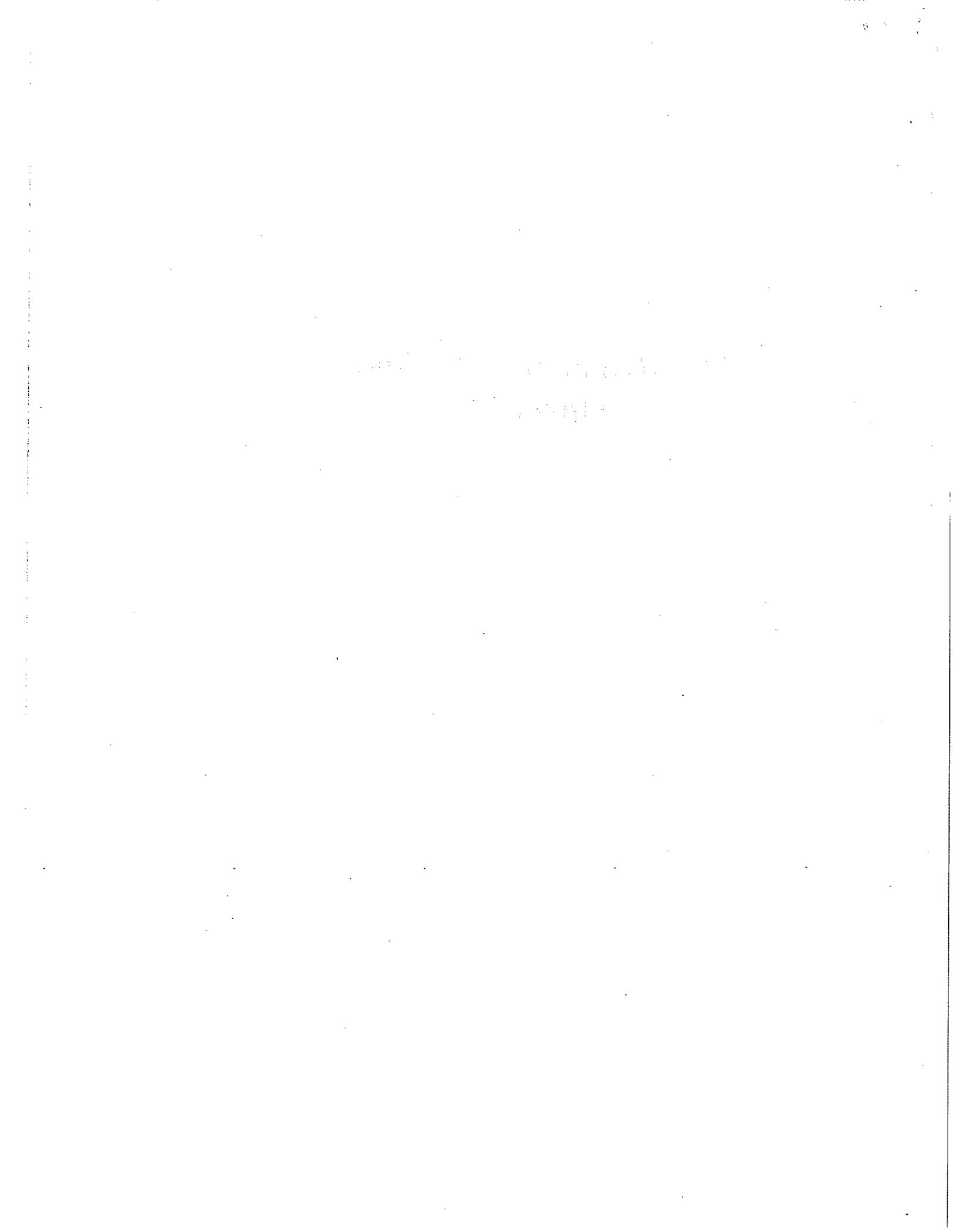


The Evolution of Middletown's  
Urban Renewal

By Karen Horwitz



## 1) Introduction-

I walked down Pearl Street over two weeks ago, and I noticed the green dilapidated house for the first time after four long years here. Even though the street was prickling with multi-colored trees the green house stuck out. The roof was sagging in the middle, which made a sharp New England day feel ratty and depressing. The side of the house facing campus was charred, its pea green paint peeled and blistering. The windows were long, dirty sheets and the black tin mailbox was beaten in and vacant. A small piece of wood was nailed over the window facing Court Street. It was painted white and read:

“Notice of Public Hearing for Zoning.

Application at 7:00 p.m. in the Council Chamber

DeKoven Dr. September 10, 1997.”

When I walked down Pearl Street a week later, a friend of mine was standing in front of the decomposing house, reading the sign nailed to the frail boards. As I approached her, she turned to me and said, “Thank God *somebody’s* doing something to clean up this hell hole.”

This “hell hole” is <sup>in</sup> Middletown Connecticut, incorporated in 1653 and originally called Mattabesek, meaning portage or carrying place, due to its strategic location along the Connecticut River. Yet, despite its central location, Middletown’s economy began to stagnate just after the close of World War II. As a result, leaders in the community began to search for methods with which to revitalize Middletown’s economy. This began the long and arduous process of Middletown’s urban renewal planning, which will be the focus of this essay.

In the following essay I will examine the history of Middletown’s urban renewal process, organizing this history around three clear eras of planning philosophy: the first wave (1950-1963), the evolution period (1963-1970), and the second wave (1970-1990). I will show how first wave renewal ideologies evolved gradually over time, and eventually led to a philosophy of urban redevelopment that is still implemented today. Although I will argue that Middletown’s planning philosophies changed noticeably over this forty year period, I will also maintain that its renewal planning did remain consistent in one

respect; its plans were always categorically disadvantageous to the poor, non-white and/or immigrant populations of Middletown.

The first wave of urban renewal began on a national level after the close of the second world war and focused on three central issues within the city: slum or "blight" clearance<sup>1</sup>, economic improvement of the central business district (CBD), and enhancement of municipal tax revenue (Colean 1953, Rothenburg 1967, Abbott 1993). But a dominant perception that blight was the causal factor in the deterioration of both the CBD and the city's tax base, determined the efforts of first wave planning. As a result planning during this period obsessed with the elimination of all blighted areas within the central city and saw this as the means to the end of solving the problem of urban decay.

By 1963 however, repeated failures to improve the condition of the central city caused a schism within public support for urban renewal projects. As greater numbers of people challenged the presupposition that the mere destruction of blighted areas would, on its face, rectify the problems of the central city, renewal planning began to evolve. However the evolutionary period should not be viewed as a complete break from prior planning ideologies, but rather, as a mutation of first wave ideologies. Where the first wave centered around "slum" or "blight" removal, evolution era planners began to rehabilitate buildings as well (Colean 1953, Jacobs 1961, Meyerson and Banfield 1963). The CBD was addressed in and of itself during the evolutionary era, and the aesthetic impact became considered integral to the success of the city (Meyerson and Banfield 1963, Middletown Plan of Redevelopment 1965, Abbott 1993). During this period, the attempt to build higher end housing was coupled with an effort to increase the amount of tourism in the area, as means to enlarge the city's tax base (Middletown Renewal Challenge 1969, Kleniewski 1984, Barrington et al. 1993).

By 1970 nationally standardized renewal plans had consistently failed and redevelopers began to focus more clearly on the specific strengths and weaknesses of their particular city. In the second wave, slum removal continues, but the effort to create a "historic village" within the central city was effected mainly through the rehabilitation of old

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<sup>1</sup> Blight was defined in the 1954 report as a lot of land that had at least two of the following deficiencies: no central heat, no hot water, no dual egress, no private bath, no toilet, "serious deterioration", rats or vermin, or other undefined deficiencies.

buildings (Meyerson and Banfield 1963, Sucher 1995). In this period the formerly profit-oriented assessment of the CBD was relinquished, and replaced by an increased valuation of the perception of the city (Mayne, Abbott 1993, Sucher 1995). Finally, the second wave of urban renewal focused on the promotion of tourism, in addition to, the push for higher income people to live in the central city.

What becomes clear from the evolutionary tale of urban renewal practices, is the way in which urban renewal plans changed to fit historically specific urban ideals. Because opinions about what constituted the "ideal city" changed over time, theorists have had difficulty articulating a definition of urban renewal (Abbott 1993, Sucher 1995, Colean 1953, Kemp 1990). In fact, what does become clear is the way in which definitions of urban renewal reflected dominant, momentary ideals of the central city. For example, in the first wave, renewal was often defined as, "means to eliminate substandard or blighted areas." (Middletown Preliminary Redevelopment Plan, 1954) However, by the evolution period, the break in the causality between the existence of blight and the degradation of the central city, caused redevelopers to define renewal as multi-modal effort to improve the city. As one source notes, typical renewal efforts of this time focused on, "rehabilitation, spot clearance, code enforcement, credit and tax policies and income supplements to the poor," (Rothenburg, 1967) However, as redevelopment entered its second wave, increased emphasis on "pulling" visitors into cities was clearly reflected in definitions of renewal. One example is evident in Middletown's redevelopment plan of 1971 which stated that renewal was: "new business opportunities, improved traffic circulation...and a revitalization of downtown as an activity center with new business and convention facilities." (Urban Renewal Plan of Middletown, 1971)

Precisely because urban redevelopers have implemented radically different plans over the three eras, theorists have struggled with how to properly analyze the history of urban renewal. However, throughout my research, I have identified three methods used to analyze and discuss redevelopment planning. The first mode is a comparative approach in which renewal is conceptualized in two distinct time periods, and these eras are compared and contrasted to one another (Bailey 1971, Harvey 1989). The second mode of analysis frames urban renewal efforts as haphazard and reactive and therefore does not

conceptualize consistent or coherent time periods of renewal ideology. Instead, this technique focuses the analysis on specific efforts of renewal planning, without regard to creating coherent patterns of redevelopment planning (Abbott 1993, Sucher 1995). The third type of discussion is one in which renewal is discussed in a socio-historical context and is seen as inseparable from its place in history (Barrington et al 1990, Chandrasekhara 1993).

In this paper I will employ all three of these strategies in an effort to show the ways in which Middletown's renewal planning reflected national trends of redevelopment philosophy. Throughout this essay I will prove that Middletown's renewal planning began with first wave philosophies, which focused obsessively on the removal of blight as means to solve the problems of the CBD, and its deteriorating tax base. I will go on to show a movement into evolution period planning, which visualized problems concerning the tax base and CBD as variables independent from the mere existence of blight. Finally, I will prove that Middletown espoused second wave planning ideology, which concerned itself with the rehabilitation of historic buildings, the individuality of Middletown as a cultural center, and the promotion of tourism. Throughout this discussion I will also examine the way in which Middletown's renewal planning was completely consistent; that is, the way in which redevelopment plans adversely effected the poor, non-white and immigrant populations of Middletown.

## 2) Methodology-

I began my research three months ago after listening to a long presentation about the potential benefits of Main Street Middletown, a non-profit urban redevelopment project. Barbara Goodrich, Middletown's Downtown Manager, spoke to Wesleyan's class of 2001 in Crowell Concert Hall, and after the presentation, I decided to introduce myself. Having no plan for what I might say, my hand shot out in front of me and I said, with too much conviction, "My name is Karen Horwitz and you have the job I want, please let me intern for you."

Later that night, as I relayed the story to friends, I was teased about my characteristic lack of tact. However, my bluntness achieved its desired result, and two weeks later I met Ms. Goodrich at the corner of Williams and Main Street for the first meeting of Middletown's Economic Restructuring Committee. One of the five requisite committees established by Main Street USA, this committee is in charge of "strengthening downtown's economic base while finding ways to expand its economy and market share."<sup>2</sup>

With that began my internship at Main Street USA. This paper, and the research therein is a composite of knowledge gleaned from extensive documentary research, and from participant observation at Main Street meetings and events. Although the arguments in this paper could not stand solidly on observation alone, I found that the experiences I have had with the Main Street program gave me a more specific language with which to communicate the subject of urban renewal.

Additionally, my knowledge of Middletown's urban renewal process was aided by reading over thirty renewal plans, written over the course of forty years of urban redevelopment. These plans were written by various Middletown committees, such as the Planning and Zoning Commission (founded in 1931), the Greater Middletown Chamber of Commerce (established in 1895) and the Middletown Redevelopment Agency (founded in 1954). Lastly I have employed information gathered from many documents distributed by Main Street USA such as Middletown and Connecticut censuses, Main

Street guidelines for renewal and Middletown's application for entry into the Main Street USA program.

My participant observation has taken a variety of forms, such as participation at meetings of the Economic Restructuring Committee, a forum about possible methods for Middletown's revitalization given by Gibbs and Associates, and at the Main Street USA office located in Middletown's Chamber of Commerce.

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<sup>2</sup> "Welcome to Main Street" trifold distributed by Main Street USA

### 3) The Theory and Findings-

The first wave of urban renewal began in 1950, as cities across the nation staggered from the results of increased suburbanization. Suburbanization, contrary to popular belief, was not a new concept. However, as Barry Checkoway notes, what was new about this period was,

“...the capacity of large builders to take raw suburban land, divide it into parcels and streets, install needed services, apply mass production methods to residential construction, and sell the finished product to unprecedented numbers of consumers.”<sup>3</sup>

The effect of such suburbanization was that already existing spatial dichotomies between middle-class and working-class Americans, were greatly exacerbated. As Earnest W. Burgess noted twenty-five years earlier, the city was divided into loops of habitation, in which the lowest income individuals lived closest to the center of the city. Wealthier people, on the other hand, lived farther away from the central city, where there was less noise and minimal pollution<sup>4</sup>. As suburbanization drew wealthier residents out of cities completely, many people became concerned about the future of central cities. During the first wave era, the categorization of the city as a place of uncontrollable poverty and crime, further deterred middle-class individuals from living within the central city<sup>5</sup>. This linkage between the deterioration of the central city, and the over-population of working class people within the city, shaped cultural assumptions and ideals of first wave renewal planning.

Although first wave planning focused on three concerns: the elimination of blight, the economic improvement of the CBD, and the enhancement of the city's tax base, planners

<sup>3</sup> Barry Checkoway “Large Builders, Federal Housing Programs, Postwar Suburbanization” from Marxism and the Metropolis ed. William Tabb and Larry Sawyers Oxford University Press: New York, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Earnest W. Burgess “The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project” from The City ed. Robert E. Park Chicago UP: 1925.

<sup>5</sup> For further information concerning the city as a place of “uncontrollable poverty and crime” see, Georg Simmel “The Metropolis and Mental Life” from The Sociology of Georg Simmel ed. Kurt H. Wolff The Free Press: New York 1950 and Edward Banfield “Several Kinds of Crime” from The Unheavenly City Revisited Little Brown and Co.: Boston 1968.

of this time viewed the latter two problems to be results of the existence of blight within the central city.

Middletown's first wave of urban renewal clearly reflects these dominant cultural assumptions. Middletown's first wave planners, imbued with dominant opinions about the existence of poverty, mercilessly attacked blighted areas in their attempt to revitalize the city. First wave planners in Middletown claimed that the removal of blight would solve the economic condition of the CBD, because the elimination of slums would leave more room for profit-driven business in the area. Planners of this time also claimed that the removal of slums would stimulate the growth of the tax base; this argument was two-fold. Not only would the removal of blighted areas create additional space for the creation of higher end properties, which would increase municipal property tax revenues, but it would lessen the number of people within city limits who relied on social services.

However, by 1963, plans effected under first wave planners had not made substantial changes in the condition of central cities. Furthermore, increasing societal unrest concerning the consistent displacement of certain populations led to a rash of urban riots around the country. As one source notes,

"The urban riots which hit even progressive cities like New Haven, pointed to the failures of traditional urban renewal strategies. The poor people who were so frequently uprooted by redevelopment increasingly called for an expanded role in shaping renewal projects, sparking a nation-wide debate over 'citizen participation' in all governmental programs."<sup>6</sup>

Once national shifts in attitudes concerning "slum" removal took hold, so too did urban renewal ideologies. Although the removal of blighted areas was still a major concern, for the first time the historic importance of old buildings entered into redevelopment planning. As a result, plans to rehabilitate historic buildings became an integral part of evolutionary planning philosophy.

During the evolution period, redevelopers also began to address the weaknesses of the CBD and the tax base independently from the mere existence of blight. Attempts to stimulate the CBD took on a variety of forms during this time, but most generally, they attempted to nourish the individual qualities of each city. One way in which redevelopment sought to enhance the uniqueness of cities during this time, was the

movement toward a specialization of urban economies. Plans to specialize urban economies had the advantage of creating economies of scale, which cut down production costs, and thereby increased net profits. However, specialization also served as a way to enhance the notoriety of cities, through the mass production of one specific product. Such tactics were used in Houston, for example, with the oil industry, and in Detroit with the automobile industry<sup>7</sup>.

During the evolution period, planners also began to conceptualize the city as an environment, and for the first time, the aesthetics of the city were viewed as integral to its success<sup>8</sup>. In this era the concepts such as the "urban village" or "human scale planning" began to take hold, and placed a new emphasis on the feelings evoked by urban spaces<sup>9</sup>.

Attempts to enlarge the existing tax base also changed during the evolution period of urban renewal. Where first wave planners focused on increasing revenues from property taxes, evolution period planners also promoted tourism as means to increase general municipal income. Therefore, in this period of urban renewal, planners began to focus on the creation of transportation, transient accommodations, and civic centers.

The second wave of urban renewal began in 1970, and focused even more closely on specific parts of evolution period planning. In this period, even more resources were allotted to refurbish dilapidated buildings in central cities, due in part to the creation of institutions such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which was founded in 1966. However, it should be clearly noted that the creation of such institutions *did not* stop the clearance of "blighted" areas. These two trends were not mutually exclusive because national monies to refurbish "historic" buildings were only distributed for use on buildings that fit nationally mandated standards of historicity. However, due to past

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<sup>6</sup> Brendan Barrington et al. "Report on the Renewal of Middletown's North End" 1993

<sup>7</sup> See Simmel "The Metropolis and Mental Life" 1950, Joe R. Feagin "The Global Context of Metropolitan Growth: Houston and the Oil Industry" Chicago UP, 1985, David Harvey "The Urban Process Under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis" from *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* March 1978.

<sup>8</sup> See Sharon Zukin *The Cultures of Cities* Blackwell Press: Cambridge, 1995, and Carl Abbott "Five Downtown Strategies", The Pennsylvania University Press: Pennsylvania, 1993

<sup>9</sup> See David Sucher *City Comforts*, City Comforts Press: Seattle, 1995 and Abbott, 1993.

trends in housing development, buildings that qualified as "historic sites" were rarely structures inhabited by the poor<sup>10</sup>.

The second wave of urban renewal also continued to focus on the individuality of the city, however at times efforts to promote cities as places of industry and notoriety, usurped prior efforts to include aesthetics into renewal ideology. Finally, the second wave of redevelopment continued to emphasize tourism as a means to increase municipal income.

Although national trends in urban renewal ideology have been more clearly detailed, it is impossible to understand Middletown as a specific example of these national renewal trends, without some discussion of Middletown's economic demise. Because this essay will focus on those populations most adversely affected by redevelopment in Middletown, this section will begin around the time that immigrants began to flood into the area, for it would be these individuals who would lose most from renewal planning.

In the 1840's Middletown's economy was far from troubled, in fact during this time the city led the state in the number of factories and the value of their products<sup>11</sup>. By 1845 Middletown continued its economic dominance through the production of specialty goods, such as ivory combs, gold spectacles and lace<sup>12</sup>. In the 1870's Middletown's economy continued to grow, aided by an influx of immigrants who provided cheap labor to Middletown's entrepreneurs. In fact it was in this period that Irish, Russian, Polish and Italian immigrants began to flood into Middletown.

This economic growth continued into the new century and Middletown's economy was supported by many stable and profitable industries such as The Eisenhuth Horseless Vehicle Company, and the Keating Wheel Works. Although the Great Depression did devastate many families in Middletown, it did not completely disembowel its economy because few people had heavily invested in the stock market. By 1938, Middletown's

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<sup>10</sup> See Jane Jacobs The Death and Life of Great American Cities Vintage Press: New York, 1961.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth A. Warner A Pictorial History of Middletown The Donning Company: Virginia, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Warner 1990

downtown was stable and lively and was considered to be "the only shopping center of Middlesex County."<sup>13</sup>

With the beginning of World War II, Middletown's economy was booming, and the need for increased numbers of workers was constant. As a result the Russell Manufacturing Company was forced to drive a car around the streets of Middletown with a sign reading, "we need 420 MORE WORKERS immediately"<sup>14</sup>. However, the end of World War II caused a variety of changes that began Middletown's economy on its rapid descent. As soldiers filtered back into Middletown, and its population density grew, the demand for workers constricted, leaving many people unemployed. Increased access to motor vehicles, and enlarged highway systems added to the problem, by providing the means for Middletown residents to work outside the area<sup>15</sup>. Soon after massive numbers of people found employment outside of Middletown's CBD, new techniques in suburban development such as Levitt towns, provided the final economic incentive for people to move outside of Middletown altogether. The staggering number of middle-class families that moved into suburban environments reflected greater, national trends. Additionally, this change in urban demographics left Middletown with a high proportion of people who were dependent on social welfare programs. This is clearly reflected by Middletown's request for federal monies in 1949, with which the city erected its first low-income housing project, so as to meet the increasing need for subsidized housing.<sup>16</sup>

Only a year later a Middletown redevelopment agency began hatching a plan that would attempt to address the weaknesses of the city. Middletown's first renewal project was implemented in the mid 1950's, and was centered around the destruction of "categorically deficient" housing along Water Street<sup>17</sup>. Middletown planners claimed that, "only with the elimination of blight will our central city prosper again."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. In 1950 over 12,000 people lived and worked in Middletown whereas by 1954 13,000 people lived in Middletown but over three hundred residents commuted to their jobs

<sup>16</sup> Long River Village Development Plan 1948.

<sup>17</sup> "Categorically deficient" is a reference to Lata Chandrasekhara's "Downtown Revitalization Impact on Low-Income Neighborhoods in Mid-Sized Cities in the Post-Industrial North East" April 1993. Additionally, the area on Water Street that was demolished is shown in appendix A, and is represented by the blue line North East of the city. In fact, this area was completely razed only four months after the proposal of this plan.

The plan went on to propose the creation of a highway which would connect Middletown to Hartford and New Haven, and which would increase vehicular access to Middletown from both the North and South of Connecticut. Middletown's first wave planners claimed that the area would clearly benefit from the clearance of these blighted buildings and the subsequent erection of a highway system in its place. Here the implicit connection between the existence of slums and the degradation of Middletown's CBD, held by its first wave planners, becomes clear. The plan of 1952 clearly stated that the existence of blighted areas detracted from CBD land-value, while it also used up space, "...that [could] be better used in business activity."<sup>19</sup>

Middletown's planners also claimed that the elimination of blighted areas, in conjunction with the creation of a highway, would encourage higher income people to relocate in Middletown due to its central location in the state. Planners also asserted that the elimination of blighted structures would free space in the CBD for the construction of higher end properties.

Middletown's redevelopment plan of the 1950's must be seen as the first of many renewal plans which assumed that the elimination of slums would, by definition, solve the problems of the city. Of course the elimination of slums also meant the dislocation of poor families that lived in these blighted areas. The demolition of the Water Street area uprooted over fifty families, over 80% of whom were black or Polish. Additionally, of the nearly fifty families that were uprooted by this plan, forty-six of these families earned between a half and a quarter of Middletown's median income<sup>20</sup>.

Four years after the proposal to create Route 9, the Middletown Redevelopment Agency (a part of Middletown's Common Council) undertook another major renewal effort which laid the foundation for the "acquire, relocate, demolish, sell strategy" of urban renewal in Middletown<sup>21</sup>. The agency claimed that the purpose of their plan was "to provide greater

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<sup>18</sup> Middletown Planning and Zoning Commission plan of 1952.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

tax revenues and a greater economic return for the entire city [which would be accomplished] by eliminating substandard dwelling conditions."<sup>22</sup>

The plan identified two areas of renewal, the first of which was Court place, located on the Corner of Court and Main streets, and the second was the Center Street project which was at the corner of College and Main streets<sup>23</sup>.

In 1957 a report on the Court Place project was circulated, which reported that the two and a half acre area contained sixty three lots comprised of 44 families and nineteen businesses, and was less than two percent vacant. The report went on to claim that seven out of nine lots in the area were substandard and the area was blighted<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, under chapter 55 of the Connecticut General Statutes, which read that any area which was "beyond remedy and control solely by regulatory processes in the exercise of police power and cannot be dealt with effectively by the ordinary operations of private enterprise without the aids of urban renewal should be razed". In 1958 the entire two and a half acre area was leveled.

A new City Hall and an adjoining parking lot were proposed for the area, and the Agency pronounced that such a plan was the only "logical extension" of the CBD. The entire scope of the stipulated efforts was to remove "blighted" living conditions in an effort to improve the CBD. According to the planners, the erection of a City Hall on Main Street would ensure improved CBD profits because a continuous flow of people through City Hall would provide a larger number of people who would shop and eat in the area.

The second area targeted for renewal in the 1954 plan was the Center Street area, for which there was no suggested replacement. Middletown proposed to rip down over two hundred lots because of their "strategic central location and their closeness to the heart of the central business district"<sup>25</sup> and to use this land to enlarge the area of the CBD. The City received 3,598,000 dollars in state and federal monies and used a substantial portion to level the entire seven and a half acre area of Center Street place. Again the Redevelopment Agency and the City of Middletown claimed that under chapter 55 of the

<sup>22</sup> Middletown Redevelopment Agency. Preliminary Redevelopment Plan, 1954.

<sup>23</sup> See appendix A- the Court Street project is outlined in red and the Center Street project in yellow.

<sup>24</sup> Middletown Redevelopment Agency. Preliminary Redevelopment Plan 1954.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Connecticut General Statutes, that this "blighted" area had to be removed<sup>26</sup>. This resulted in the destruction of the old City Hall, several parks and playgrounds and a densely inhabited residential area.

However, after the land was cleared no businesses or developers could be found to fill the area and Middletown was forced to pave it over and make it into a municipal parking lot<sup>27</sup>. This tragic story is the epitome of first wave renewal planning, in which the obsession to purge the city of blight allowed planners to dislocate 187 Russian, Polish and black families, without any plans for how to redevelop the area after its razing. However, Middletown's planners at this time claimed that this dispersion was necessary in order to "...fully realize the land utility of the downtown area."<sup>28</sup> Because, land utility attempts to maximize profits derived per square acre of land, this claim further highlights the ways in which first wave planners connected the existence of blight to the degradation of the CDB<sup>29</sup>.

Although the plan of 1954 did make grandiose great claims about the equality of its relocation plan, offering financial assistance to those who could not afford to pay the expenses of moving, such changes did not actually remedy the base unfairness of resettlement. Despite the fact that 56% of those relocated were eligible for allocated financial assistance, only 26% of these families actually received compensation for their move. Furthermore, although 112 families were eligible for subsidized housing, only 38 families were able to find housing that fell in this price range<sup>30</sup>. This suggests that, although national tides about pushing poor people out of the city were changing, that Middletown's planners did not actually change the substantive effects of its redevelopment planning.

Between March of 1964 and June of 1965 the Technical Plan Associates drew up two plans for redevelopment, as per the request made by the Middletown Redevelopment Agency. The Technical Plan Associates proposed that there were two areas in

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<sup>26</sup> The Agency found that 3/4 of the units had no heat, 1/2 had no water and over 98 percent of the existing units were infested by rodents.

<sup>27</sup> Brendan Barrington et al. "Report on the Renewal of Middletown's North End" 1993

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of economic utility see Jerome Rothenburg An Economic Evaluation of Urban Renewal The Brookings Institute: Washington DC, 1967.

<sup>30</sup> Chandrasekhara 1993.

Middletown that could be sites for renewal; a first priority area which was marked by Washington Street, Route 17, the Connecticut River and High street, all within the central business district, and the second priority area which was over five miles away from this area<sup>31</sup>.

The Technical Associates divided up the first priority area into two smaller parcels of land, both of which were claimed to need complete clearance so as to eliminate "blight and potential blight." The second priority area however, which included the federally subsidized housing complex of Long River Village (LRV), was said to be almost completely intact. In fact, the 1964 and 1965 plans suggested that some funds, albeit a minute portion, be siphoned off to be put toward small improvements of this housing project.

Although the "first priority" of this plan was to eliminate the blight that was debasing the economic success of the CDB, the plan also showed the ways in which planning ideology was beginning to evolve. Most clearly, the creation of funding for the rehabilitation of LRV, did reflect the national movement toward evolution-style planning philosophy. However, this evolution should not be over stated, for the refurbishment of LRV must also be seen as evidence of the continued effort to push poor residents out of Middletown's central city.

Following national trends, Middletown began to address the problems of the CBD as an independent variable in the 1964 and 1965 plans. These plans were created after the first serious evaluation of Middletown's economy was made by Raymond and May Associates in 1963. This evaluation found that Middletown's economy had four major strengths: manufacturing, retail business, institutions, and location. Based on this information, Middletown's planners continued to follow changing national trends in renewal philosophy by suggesting a movement toward increased specialization. As a result, Middletown's planning agencies targeted a three-block, residential area North of the Portland Bridge for razing, and in its stead, proposed the building of an industrial zone<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Middletown City Plan Commission "Plan of Development: Interim Report", 1964. Technical Plan Associates

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Also see appendix A-the area selected for demolition is outlined in green.

Additionally, these plans reflect national changes in planning ideology in that they began to address the importance of aesthetics in the CBD. Middletown's planners of this time began to assume that the attractiveness of the area was a major factor in whether or not people would shop in Middletown's business district. As a result, these plans suggested that 20% more land in the CBD, be devoted to open space, and recreational facilities<sup>33</sup>. One manifestation of this was the stipulation that all high-density living areas should have at least two-square feet of open space per person<sup>34</sup>. Still another was the suggestion that the blighted Middletown high school building be razed, because the land would be, "better utilized as an outdoor playspace."<sup>35</sup>

During this time, Middletown's planners also began to follow national trends which approached the enhancement of the city's tax base, as independent from the existence of blight. As a result, it was during this time that Middletown planning agencies began to highlight the advantages of tourism for municipal income. For this reason it was the 1964 and 1965 plans which suggested the refurbishment of Middletown's waterfront because, "the river contributes greatly to the scenic aspects of Middletown, but unfortunately much of its length is not visible nor available for enjoyment by the residents or potential visitors."<sup>36</sup> In addition, the group contended that the stability and growth of Middletown's tax base could be significantly improved if an airport were to be built in the outskirts of the city.

Although these plans clearly reflected national evolutionary trends in planning, in which the removal of blight was no longer seen as the sole means for revitalizing the city, Middletown still attacked the housing of poor, non-white and immigrant groups. Of the 75 families that were relocated from the North End, 65 of these families were either Italian, Polish or black. Furthermore, although the plans still made promises to find

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. High density living areas were defined in this plan as area which housed between 10 and 16 families per acre.

<sup>35</sup> In these plans a high density area is defined as one in which between 10 and 16 families live per acre Middletown City Plan Commission "Plan of Development: Interim Report", 1964 and 1965. Technical Plan Associates

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 1965

"comparable housing" for groups that were relocated, only 16 of the 36 families were provided with housing that fit their spending capabilities.

The "Middletown Renewal Challenge" plan of 1969 must also be seen as evidence of Middletown's changing redevelopment ideology. The plan began by clearly situating itself within evolution period discourse, by claiming that it would focus on,

"...not just the economic objectives of renewal, but also on the social, and physical objectives... rather than ignoring the complicated nature of the urban revitalization process."<sup>37</sup>

In fact, it is in this plan that the evolution of first wave planning, into what would become second wave ideology, became the most apparent. In 1969 Middletown received almost two million dollars in state assistance for their renewal plan that would "provide an attractive setting for modern, efficient and commercial facilities which are easily accessible and provide adequate amenities."<sup>38</sup> The plan began by proposing that Middletown would benefit from the removal of all the buildings at the North West corner of Williams street and Main street due to their slum- like condition. Although only 87% of these structures were actually blighted, the entire area was cleared anyway<sup>39</sup>.

However this plan also suggested that the North End be targeted for a rehabilitation effort which was to be a combination of elimination and enhancement of existing structures. As a result, eight buildings were selected for preservation, and Middletown's first historic district was established.

The plan went on to identify two main objectives, both of which were expected to improve the condition of the CBD. The first was the renovation of the Middlesex Theater which was framed as a means to improve the perception of Middletown. Middletown's planners claimed in this plan, that the refurbishment of the theater would enhance Middletown's notoriety as a center of culture and art.

The second proposal made in the plan of 1969, was to increase the quality of the landscaping within the central business district. These planners contended that in order

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<sup>37</sup> "Middletown Renewal Challenge" 1969

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> See appendix A--the pink dot represents the area cleared.

for the CBD to grow people must feel that the area was aesthetically pleasing, and therefore this plan attempted to, "improve the ethos of the downtown area."

During this period, efforts to beautify the CBD were coupled with plans to increase tourism in Middletown, and in the 1969 plan waterfront redevelopment became visualized as means to both ends. As a result, the 1969 plan suggested massive landscaping along the Connecticut River. The plan detailed the creation of bike paths, picnic areas, hiking routes and finally, a park adjacent to the river. The plan clearly stated the connection between beautification and tourism when it said, "...people who visit the area to enjoy its outdoor spaces, will surely stop to shop in Middletown."<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, purely tourism-oriented projects were implemented in this period, and as a result the addition of an upscale inn near the CBD, was finalized two months after the release of this plan. However, the 1969 plan was true to evolution practices in that it also focused on prior efforts to "pull" wealthier people into Middletown as residents<sup>41</sup>. As a result, 58 units of high-end waterfront property were proposed in conjunction with efforts to beautify Middletown's central city.

Although the 1969 plan claimed that its goal was to provide "both shelter and necessary supporting facilities such as open space, recreational areas, and neighborhood shopping for low and moderate income groups" in actuality it did nothing of the sort. In fact, less than two-years later one of the redevelopers responsible for the creation of the 1969 plan was quoted as saying,

"I saw that the concentration of our urban pathology was within the four block area that I could see from my office window. I knew that the slums were cancerous and had to be removed."<sup>42</sup>

The disease related language of this statement clearly reflects the fact that certain people's opinions about poverty and blight had not been changed by changing national opinions on these issues. This explains how Middletown still effected redevelopment plans in ways that categorically disenfranchised certain populations. Eight months after

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<sup>40</sup> "Middletown Renewal Challenge" 1969

<sup>41</sup> For a much more extensive discussion of push versus pull ideologies of redevelopment, see Barrington et al. 1993.

the approval of the 1969 plan, an area on Williams Street was razed, and 107 families were displaced. Sources note that somewhere between 30 and 40% of these families were below the poverty line, and an overwhelming number were African American<sup>43</sup>. Another source claimed that this particular redevelopment plan caused "a virtual diaspora of Middletown's black community."<sup>44</sup>

The plans of 1964-65 and 1969 clearly show the fact that Middletown's redevelopment process followed national trends in planning ideology, which also began to shift at this time. However, by 1970, national trends changed again, and Middletown followed suit by espousing second wave renewal philosophies in its post-1970 redevelopment plans. One potential catalyst to Middletown's change into second wave philosophies, was the formation of the Greater Middletown Trust. Incorporated in 1972, the Trust's central aim was to suppress the demolition of more of Middletown's historic downtown<sup>45</sup>.

Interestingly enough, Middletown's first redevelopment plan that worked with second wave ideals, was adopted in 1972. Large-scale rehabilitation efforts began during this time, and the 1972 plan called for the refurbishment of many buildings formerly used for retail. For example, the plan suggested that the "Pantheon Building" be remodeled into condominium-style living spaces. In addition, a fifty-three unit building on Broad Street was renovated during this time, and ultimately led to the creation of, "twenty-six larger and more beautiful properties."<sup>46</sup> Finally, the plan suggested that Middletown's armory be reconfigured into a dormitory for nurses of Connecticut Valley Hospital (CVH).

This same plan, written by Carabetta Enterprises, also dubs CVH as one of the three "prime movers" of Middletown's economy, and suggested that, "Middletown could only benefit from the presence of notable institutions such as Connecticut Valley Hospital within the confines of the city."<sup>47</sup> Here, national second wave ideals of the city as a center of specialized products and services, began to be reflected in Middletown's redevelopment strategies. Additionally, the Carabetta plan called for a relaxation of

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<sup>42</sup> Stephen K. Bailey "Urban Renewal Then and Now", from a speech delivered to the Greater Middletown Chamber of Commerce on June 21, 1971.

<sup>43</sup> Chandrasekhara 1993

<sup>44</sup> Black Women's League Black Perspectives on Middletown December 1976

<sup>45</sup> Barrington et al. 1993

<sup>46</sup> Carabetta Enterprises "Comprehensive Concept for Middletown's Future Development" July 1972

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

historically stringent planning and zoning ordinances, in order to create "a hospitable climate for important businesses."<sup>48</sup>

The 1972 plan also reflects national changes in addressing the problems of municipal tax bases. The plan stated that, "revitalization of the city's core area [would occur] through the erection of approximately 800 housing units of all types."<sup>49</sup> Although this could have meant a greater effort to erect lower-end housing in the CBD, in reality, this statement referred to a creation of both high-end residential and transient accommodations in the area. One such project began in the fall of 1973, which was allocated 15,000 square feet of space in the CBD to be devoted to the construction of fifty high-end apartments. As in prior eras, the creation of such properties were expected to induce wealthier individuals to move into Middletown.

However, Middletown's commitment to the creation of housing was strictly limited to the erection of expensive properties, rather than the low-income housing that Middletown desperately needed. Although the 1972 plan also claimed that a 100 room single room occupancy motel would be erected in the CBD, plans for this motel were never even addressed by the Middletown Common Council<sup>50</sup>.

In the preliminary and final plans written by the Planning and Zoning Commission of Middletown in 1974 and 1975 respectively, one can see an even more evident manifestation of second wave renewal policies. The 1974 plan, for example, stated that of their ten goals for renewal the, "preservation and protection of historical, cultural resources of Middletown" was rated of third highest importance<sup>51</sup>. Although this was probably a plea for funds distributed by the Urban Homesteading Act of 1973, which offered monetary to cities for the rehabilitation of dilapidated buildings, this plan still reflected dominant second wave renewal ideology. In fact, by September of 1974, two more buildings were inducted into the historic district, and even parking lots had become sites for rehabilitation. As a result, efforts to restore the old Bunce Company parking lot (behind what is now the Main Street Market), began in October of that year.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Chandrasekhara 1993

<sup>51</sup> Planning and Zoning Commission "Preliminary Annual Report of the Comprehensive Plan" 1974

the Planning and Zoning Commission called for a general enhancement of the old Bunce company parking lot.

Additionally, it should be noted that neither the 1974 plan, nor minutes from Middletown's Common Council meetings of this time, referred to aged buildings as "blighted", which seemed to be a conscious movement away from the association between renewal and the elimination of blight.

The Commission's plan also went on to state that with some changes, Middletown could become "the Paris of Connecticut". This image clearly focused Middletown's redevelopment around the recreation of the city into powerful, notable, cultured place. The plan suggested that increased monies be spent on the promotion of Middletown as an "Italian city, with a cultural heritage that could only be found in Europe itself."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the plan went on to suggest that Middletown should further specialize its productive scope, by moving toward a greater production of exportable goods. The Commission argued that such specialization would, not only increase Middletown's notoriety in terms of the quality of its products, but it would highlight Middletown's strategic position in Connecticut.

Lastly, the plans of 1974 and 1975 show the centrality of tourism to second wave renewal planners. In April of 1974 the Planning and Zoning Commission accepted the proposal to build a race track in Middletown, which was seen as a way to lure out-of-towners into the city. Furthermore, the plan suggests that at least 20,000 square feet of space be designated to the creation of two hotels within a mile of this facility so as to increase the aptitude that visitors would stay in the area.

Despite Middletown's new found commitment to enhancement, the city did not redistribute the effects of redevelopment in a more equitable fashion. In 1975, 132 families, most of whom were poor and black, were relocated from North End. A poll that was taken by a citizen participation group during this time, claimed that of the 132 families, 76 of these were unable to afford the costs of moving<sup>53</sup>. In response to these findings, the Planning and Zoning Commission issued a statement which said,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Chandrasekhara 1993

"It would be a weak excuse if poor housing and urban deterioration were permitted simply because the inhabitants find it difficult to move."<sup>54</sup>

In 1978 Middletown's Planning and Zoning Commission suggested another renewal plan, and by this time, the "preservation of natural, historical, and cultural resources of Connecticut" had become the agencies first stipulated goal of renewal. In fact they claimed that the "Maximum utilization of scarce land and building resources in densely built up areas can be aided by a preservation program, focusing on economically feasible adaptive uses for old structures."<sup>55</sup> Such a statement clearly reflected the fact that Middletown's renewal ideology had moved into its second wave, where rehabilitation and the embracing of urban conditions such as high living density, were integral parts of planning ideology. During this time rehabilitation policies were implemented on an even larger scale, and Middletown commenced a project to rehabilitate 160 apartments on South Green Street. Furthermore, Middletown used monies from the Urban Homesteading Act to establish and rehabilitate 48 "historically important" buildings in the CBD.

The city's Planning and Zoning Commission suggested, yet again, that Middletown focus its productive energies on a few key goods which would, "...give Middletown the reputation and glory that it deserve[d]."<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the Commission stated that a re-definition of the physical space and scope of the CBD was necessary before its preeminence as a notable and productive city would be noticed. For this reason the Commission critiqued historic efforts to create strip malls on Routes 66 and 17, stating that this, "created a business spread that was not conducive to Middletown's permanent growth...and did not foster an image of our central business district as a vital one."<sup>57</sup>

However, the results of this plan make clear once again that changes in national renewal ideology did not change Middletown's affinity for razing low-income housing areas. In 1978 the entire East side of Main street, between College and Williams streets, was demolished and 228 families were forced to move. In its stead the Rivers Edge Condos

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<sup>54</sup> Planning and Zoning Commission "Preliminary Annual Report of the Comprehensive Plan" 1975

<sup>55</sup> Planning and Zoning Commission "Plan of Development" 1978

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Additionally, Middletown began the construction of strip malls in 1956 with Route 17, and in 1967 continued this practice by developing Washington Plaza on Route 66.

were built with local monies and planners proudly claimed that "the density of this area ha[d] been greatly reduced" and that the income of the new residents would be at least twice as high as their predecessors<sup>58</sup>.

In 1986 a new plan was released by CE Mequire Inc. which targeted the Riverfront as Middletown's next renewal project. Shortly after the plan was conceived, the Harborpark Improvement Agency was contracted to participate in the 1.7 million dollar waterfront redevelopment effort.

The first project that was attempted by the group was the rehabilitation of an old yacht club that had been abandoned and left to deteriorate near DeKoven drive. The Maquire group talked extensively about the benefits of the yacht club's renewal and went so far as to charge Middletown's past planners with "...a lack of vision about the benefits of enhancement."<sup>59</sup>

The C.E. Maguire group claimed that the real strength of the waterfront plan was that its completion would inevitably bring tourists into the area. The proposed marina was considered to be of first priority, and once finished, would provide a location for regattas. The groups second priority was the creation of a boardwalk along the edge of the river, which was expected to increase the level of tourism in the area by thirty percent<sup>60</sup>. Additionally, the Maguire plan also claims that the strength of the waterfront plan was that its completion would inevitably bring tourists into the area. The proposed marina was considered to be of first priority, and once finished, would provide a place for regattas to be held along the Connecticut River. The group's second priority was to place a boardwalk along the river's edge which was imagined to potentially increase the level of tourism by thirty percent<sup>61</sup>. Six months after the proposal of this plan The Town Farms Inn began an unprecedented 3.4 million dollar expansion so as to provide accommodations for the potential jump in visitors. Additionally the Connecticut Valley Railroad, in conjunction with Maguire Inc., proposed the addition of an electrically powered "brille car", which would run along the four mile stretch of the river.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> C.E. Maguire Inc. "Middletown Riverfront Development Plan Final Report" 1986

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Within two years of the suggestion of these changes by Maguire Inc., Middletown began to discuss the relocation of the St. Vincent de Paul soup kitchen which provided social services to many low-income people in Middletown. However, the Maquire Group claimed that the existence of such services in the CBD, frightened potential shoppers and residents out of the area<sup>62</sup>.

In addition, shortly after the release of this plan, Middletown looked to acquire and demolish the Arragoni Hotel, which housed a large proportion of Middletown's poor population. Although the 1986 plan claimed that it would perform, "systematic urban renewal that [would] be advantageous to all," this promise never materialized. Clearly the soup kitchen and the Arragoni Hotel provided much needed services to the poor; however their removal was considered integral to the success of the Riverfront Redevelopment Plan. Although their actual destruction did not take place at this time, the 1986 plan did place the continued existence of these services in grave jeopardy.

In 1990 Decarlo and Doll Associates proposed "The North End Business District Urban Renewal Plan" which claimed that its entire purpose was to "improve the conditions for [CBD] residents, businesses and visitors and implement a diversity of land use to improve the socio-economic status of its residents."<sup>63</sup>

The first proposal made by the group was a property rehabilitation program which eventually received over a million dollars in grant and local monies. This idea was implemented in conjunction with a plan to use local private investment in the preservation of old structures. Furthermore, the plan claimed that, "In recognition of the value of building on the preserved fabric of the [central business] district, and not seeking large scale clearances, this plan builds on local assets."<sup>64</sup> Even in cases where demolition might be needed, Decarlo and Doll claimed that specialists would be contacted so as to ensure that nothing was leveled that could in fact be saved.

The group also suggested that a new police station be built within the confines of the central business district. It was noted that the a relocation of the police station would increase the perception of safety on the part of both residents and business owners. In fact

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<sup>62</sup> Middletown Press May 1988

<sup>63</sup> Decarlo and Doll Associates "North End Central Business District Urban Renewal Plan" 1990

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Decarlo and Doll's plan focused many of its proposed efforts on the stimulation of a positive image of downtown, for according to the group, "The viability of downtown cannot be separated from the perception of that area as safe."<sup>65</sup> Decarlo and Doll claimed that the business strength of Middletown's CBD could not be enhanced without a simultaneous effort to remake its general image, and as a result, they focused on a need for a uniformity in the presentation of downtown. For this reason the group suggested changing zoning codes to allow only four or five story buildings in the area, and hearkened back to "human scale" philosophies of planning.

Decarlo and Doll also suggested the creation of a pedestrian bridge which would connect the CBD to the waterfront area. The group assumed that such a reconfiguration of the space of downtown would make it a more pleasant atmosphere, and would thereby increase the amount of tourism to the area. Additionally, the 1990 plan suggested the erection of a multi-modal transportation center, where buses, trains and boats would all converge, providing a variety of means with which visitors could enter Middletown<sup>66</sup>.

Although the movement away from terms such as "slum" or "blight" areas continued, the relocation that resulted from the 1990 plan was just as targeted at low-income groups as it had always been. Two months after the suggestion of this plan, the Arragoni hotel was picked again as a site for potential wrecking. Also, the Kingston Hotel in the CBD, which, like the Arragoni had a large number of single room occupancies, was also selected as an area to be razed. However, according to the Decarlo and Doll plan, neither of these buildings could be replaced by equivalent housing. The plan stipulated that these areas could only be used for,

"florist shops, gift shops, music stores, restaurants, stationary stores, or hotels or inns but [could] not be used for motels or inappropriate accommodations such as single occupancy hotels."<sup>67</sup>

In essence "inappropriate accommodations" were synonymous with housing for the poor, which did not maximize CBD land utility. As a result, North End families, whose median income was less than half the income of the rest of the city, were consistently moved out

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

of the CBD during this time<sup>68</sup>. Considering the fact that five of the six areas targeted by the Decarlo and Doll plan were in the North End, it is clear that the categorically negative effects of renewal planning had not changed at all by this time.

By tracing the history renewal planning several things become clear: The first is that that there were three eras of urban renewal across the nation: the first wave, the evolution period, and the second wave of renewal. Furthermore, using Middletown as a specific example of such redevelopment planning, it becomes clear that Middletown's renewal planning followed these national, changing trends. Such examination of Middletown also clarifies the ways in which first wave renewal ideologies gradually evolved into second wave philosophies, as a result of changing societal opinions about what constituted the "ideal" city. But perhaps the most staggering fact that comes from this study, is the realization that changing ideologies about planning never translated into a fair distribution of the plights of redevelopment. Indeed, attempts to provide enough adequate and centrally-located low-income housing in Middletown, never materialized. In fact, Middletown's redevelopment history tells the depressing tale of poor, non-white and immigrant populations, who were consistently disadvantaged by urban renewal programs.

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<sup>68</sup> All figures are sited in Decarlo and Doll's plan.

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