

PLACE

COMMENTARY ABOUT WHERE WE LIVE

Hartford: Time To Start Filling In The Blanks

Last month a panel of architects, planners and developers from around the country came to look at Hartford. They saw a city with a lot of empty or underused spaces. They saw a city that has succumbed to the lure of big-



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bang projects. They drew what to fresh eyes is probably an obvious conclusion: Don't do any more huge projects, and instead start filling in the blanks.

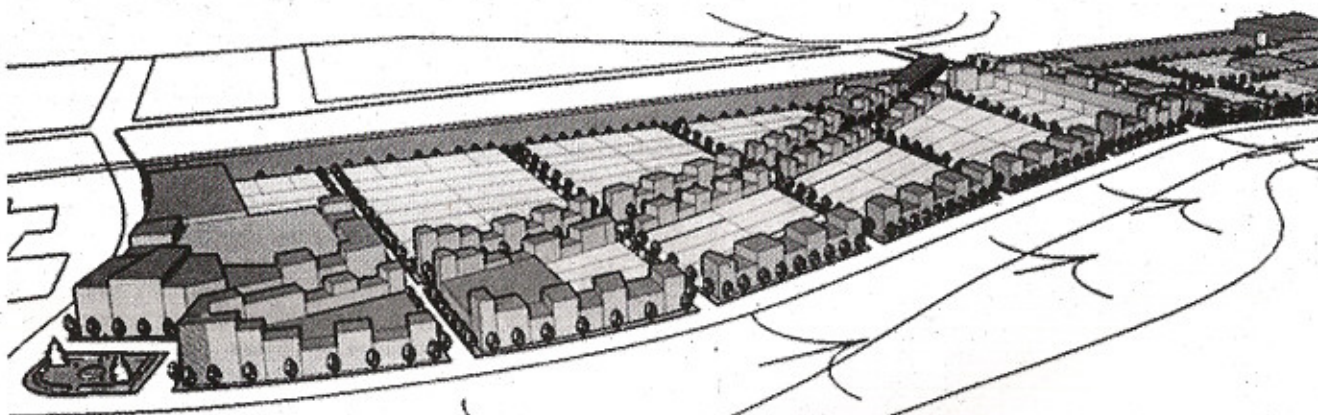
Specifically, the panel from the Urban Land Institute recommended against building a new sports arena, saying we should modernize the existing Civic Center Coliseum.

I think the panel is correct. While it would be nice to have a spanking new indoor sports palace, whether the city has a new or used arena isn't going to change the basic hole-in-the-doughnut paradigm that makes progress so difficult.

Hartford needs middle-class housing. It needs to build on its strengths, which include medicine, government and higher education, as well as insurance and financial services. Here are two projects the incoming mayor ought to make a top priority:

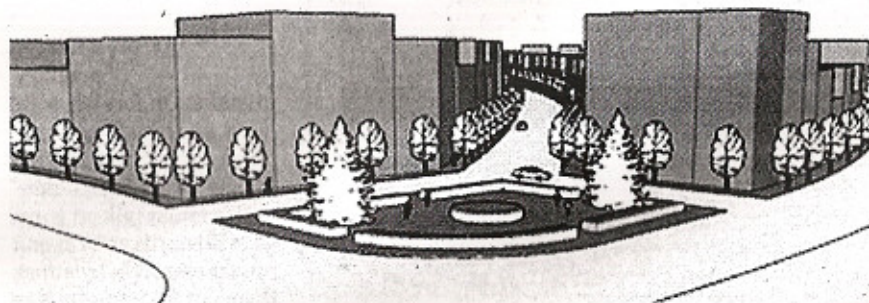
■ **Capitol Avenue.** On this street east of the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts is a moonscape of surface parking, six acres of asphalt. It's time to build something there.

If there were buildings along the street, it would cease to be a wasteland. People



GRADUATE ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS

Dawn Prahm, Silvia Garcia and Michelle Duranleau from the University of Hartford prepared this plan for the development of the Westbrook Village site in Hartford's Blue Hills area. It features housing and commercial buildings along two roads, and urban agriculture as well as a train station along the railroad track at the top of the plan.



could easily walk to the Bushnell or to the many attractions on Main Street. People could live just a block from Bushnell Park.

The Bushnell theater's management has been leery of development across the street, understandably concerned about the possible loss of parking. Obviously starving the theater of parking would be in nobody's best interest. So a condition of any development would have to be a deck or garage that would accommodate the theater crowd. But done right, development could benefit the Bushnell. Mixed-use buildings with, say, rehearsal space for arts groups and apartments for performers and others would turn the

area into an arts district.

The Bushnell's management has begun very preliminary conversations with state officials about development plans.

There've been some excellent ideas put forward over the past several years. The Hartford architectural firm Smith Edwards prepared a stunning set of drawings that filled the corridor with a mix of rowhouses and townhouses connecting via West Street to two taller buildings along Bushnell Park that suggest the famed Dakota overlooking Central Park in New York City.

Middletown planner Catherine Johnson was the consultant on a plan that filled the area with a mix of low-rise, his-

torically consistent residences, some with retail or other uses on the first floor, in the style of Newbury Street in Boston.

Let's get on it.

■ **Westbrook Village.** This old housing project is about at the end of the line. The barracks-style units that date from the early 1950s are worn and outdated. The Hartford Housing Authority can keep trying to patch them up, or it can do something great with the site.

I know it's possible—I've seen the plans.

The 71-acre parcel is near the University of Hartford. The opportunity is to create a college-town community, with housing for people of varied incomes and an

array of amenities. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to expand and complete the university, and better engage it with the city.

This spring, Robert Orr, the highly regarded New Haven architect and planner, gave a class in urban issues to UHart graduate architecture students. As a class exercise, he asked the students to create hypothetical development plans for the Westbrook Village site.

Orr shared them with me, and they are fascinating. He asked the students to consider a bunch of factors—the rail line that abuts the east side of the property; urban agriculture, an increasingly popular way to halt sprawl; a church; a school; residences; commercial buildings; streets and other connections to the university.

The students imagined a place where you could go from an apartment to a coffee shop and then on to class, or could go over to the train station and head downtown. Most of the students intertwined the development with the university and the Upper Albany neighborhood.

That would be the idea. There is a partnership of residents, neighbors, businesses and the university that's been trying to move ahead on redeveloping the site, but tumult within the housing authority a few years ago brought it to a halt. The authority has been reconstituted. It's time for the mayor to step in and get the project moving again.

Westbrook and Capitol Avenue are large projects, but not big-bang Constitution Plaza or Adriaen's Landing projects. They would fill in and reconnect parts of the city. That's what the goal should be.

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