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University Of Hartford Students Tackle Great I-84 Divide

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We were heartened to see Mayor Eddie Perez, in his inaugural address, take on the challenge of remaking the north downtown area that was so badly obliterated decades ago by the construction of I-84.

As it happens, two of my University of Hartford Master of Architecture students recently took on the challenge of creating a hypothetical urban design for this part of the city.

The two students, Michael Varisio and Gilbert Ramirez, chose the project after reviewing aerial photos of the area taken before I-84 was pushed through in the 1960s. There was a real city there! They marveled at the network of streets and cohesive, fluid neighborhoods now divided by the canyon of the I-84 roadway. The students wondered, as many of us have in hindsight, why anyone ever thought running a highway through neighborhoods in a city was a good idea.

While much of the attention is currently on Front Street, Rentschler Field and other areas, the students were more excited about trying to address this problem. They saw an opportunity to connect the business district of downtown with the more residential district of Albany Avenue, better use downtown real estate and provide some of the amenities Hartford is lacking.

Their research started with tours of Hartford and various mixed-use developments such as Blue Back Square in West Hartford. They studied maps and historic aerial photographs of Hartford.

Their design started with some basic analysis of the neighborhoods. The students wanted to draw people from all directions to their sites and blur the boundary between Albany Avenue and downtown Hartford.

Their fundamental concept was to weave the neighborhoods together with connecting streets, walkways and views; while building over the crypt created by the highway. Roads disconnected by I-84 would to be reconnected; blocks developed with new construction would be traversed with pedestrian streets. They restore some of the fabric of the city by suggesting development almost entirely on vacant sites either abandoned or currently used for parking.

They envisioned a bus station above I-84 that would provide a sheltered place to wait for the bus but also become a sculptural gateway to the city for those entering by car on I-84.

They asked what brings people — people of all ages and from different ethnic backgrounds and



financial strata — together. They concluded that everyone goes to the movies, everyone has to shop for food, everyone has to eat, everyone can enjoy a park, and virtually everyone can work or go to school.

They imagine a vertical urban market, adjacent to the G. Fox building, with a multistory atrium placed directly on an axis with Main Street. Other facilities would include a movie and performing arts theater, a restaurant alley, ground level retail, office space, residential units, a park, a community center, a magnet school for public safety (across from the soon to be renovated public safety facility on High Street) and more space for Capital Community College.

The students also felt the need to slow down the traffic on Main Street by providing two intersections with textured road materials such as cobblestone. Proposed traffic lights would stop cars a safe distance from the intersections and allow pedestrians to cross in both directions at the same time. Pedestrians in downtown Hartford should not have to risk their lives just to cross a street.

The architectural style of the proposed new construction is to be modern and forward-looking, not nostalgically historic, with buildings getting taller as they get closer to downtown. The architecture should speak to a happier, more integrated city for all to enjoy. The projects would be built in three stages, and only the third stage would require additional platforms over I-84.

The project reminded me that seasoned professionals can at times over-analyze design solutions, and sometimes young, less-experienced designers can suggest some obvious and more appropriate answers. This was the case here. We'd be happy to share the ideas with Mayor Eddie A. Perez.

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