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## A Fresh Look At Problem Places

### Bloomfield Mall Project A Springboard For U of H Design Center

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As with so many planning concepts from the 1960s, you have to wonder who thought this was a good idea. Take a traditional New England town center, with older homes and a 19th-century Congregational church, and put a faceless suburban shopping mall and parking lot right in the middle of it?

I speak of the center of Bloomfield, redeveloped when the country was being sacrificed en masse to the automobile.

The result today is an area with no distinguishing architectural style — unless "chain pharmacy" is a style — and a lot of pavement and traffic. It neither pleasant to look at or walk through. It suggests what might have happened if neighboring West Hartford had tried to shoehorn WestFarms mall into the existing town center.

Yet the area has serious potential. It has some good businesses and is surrounded by middle-class residents. Bloomfield officials want to correct the period-piece shortcomings and tap the potential. Four or five years ago, town planner Tom Hooper was talking with University of Hartford Vice President John Carson. Carson suggested that university faculty and students take a crack at the design problems of the center.

That they did. An architecture professor, Jim Fuller; an engineering professor, Dave Pines; and a visual design professor, Nancy Wynn, directed a group of students who did field work, met with residents and brought their materials back to classes. A civil engineering course, a visual communication course and two architecture courses worked up a series of proposals.

These involved everything from lighting and signage to repairing sidewalks and moving businesses closer to the street. Some suggestions have been adopted, some were discarded and many are being incorporated into new zoning regulations now being prepared.

Their work should be of great help to Bloomfield center. The additional good news is that the team is expanding into a full-fledged design forum, called the Center for Integrated Design. It has taken on two other projects and is looking for more.



This bodes well. Many of the up-and-coming metropolitan areas around the country have design centers, places where designers, business leaders, citizens and officials can come together and work out ways to improve their communities. There is even a national group, the Association for Community Design, dedicated to the movement. Hartford leaders, notably former city councilman Dr. Robert Painter, tried for years to get a design center going in the capital city.

There's no reason the Center for Integrated Design can't fulfill Dr. Bob's vision. Many design centers are university-based; one of the most effective is right down I-91.

The Yale Urban Design Workshop, founded in 1992, has worked with communities across the state on scores of projects ranging from town center and neighborhood plans, economic development strategies and community visions to the design of public spaces, streetscapes and buildings.

Workshop faculty and students have developed plans for old industrial sites, a former airport (Bethany) and any number of urban settings. Design centers "can really galvanize" local planning or redevelopment efforts, said Alan Plattus, director of the Yale workshop.

The U of H center can have that same effect in Greater Hartford. The university now has a graduate architecture department, which has brought in more design talent. The design center has expanded from its original three faculty members to include a landscape architect and planner, Terri Hahn, and two business professors, Jeffrey Cohen and Terri Albert (Nancy Wynn has left the school to return to private practice, but remains involved with the design center).

As at Yale, representatives of all disciplines are welcome. How we live together is a complicated matter. It isn't just parking. Design is important.

There's much the group can do in Hartford. If I were handing out the assignments, I'd get them cracking on the area north of I-84 in downtown to take advantage of the new public safety center. I'd send them to the Hartford Housing Authority, where new executive director Alan Green hopes to redevelop the aging Westbrook Village and Bowles Park housing projects. I'd have them help the group trying to diminish I-84 through the center of the city.

Then we'll get to some hard ones.

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