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By Kenneth R. Gosselin

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Hartford's Constitution Plaza Falls Into Foreclosure Former Bernie's Headquarters in Enfield Sold

Hartford's Constitution Plaza: Mistake Or Something Else?

by KENNETH R. GOSELIN on AUGUST 1, 2012 · 34 COMMENTS

Hartford's Constitution Plaza has often been reviled as a mistake that erased an entire, ethnically diverse neighborhood, creating a raised plaza isolated from the rest of downtown.

But an historian Wednesday urged moderation in assessing the legacy of the 1960s Urban Renewal redevelopment, even as a large chunk of the area has now fallen into foreclosure.



"I'm not saying Constitution Plaza is awesome," said Jason Scappaticci, who wrote his master's thesis on the evolution of Hartford's East Side and the plaza. "I'm not saying it's terrible. Constitution Plaza is one of those gray areas. All I'm saying is go a little softer on the criticism."

-- ADV



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Hartford's Front Street neighborhood was razed in the late 1950s to make way for Constitution Plaza. Copy of a photo taken in 1957. Photo by Kathy Hanley/The Hartford Courant.

Scappaticci, coordinator of transitional programs at Manchester Community College with degrees in history and American studies,

headlined the discussion, "Constitution Plaza: Did it rip the heart out of Hartford or Save the City?" at Hartford's Old State House.

Scappaticci said there is a tendency to overly romanticize the Front Street neighborhood which was razed in the late 1950s to make way for Constitution Plaza. While the area had a diverse immigrant population and merchants, it also long had a seedy side, thriving in illegal gambling and prostitution.



Some tenements were in tough shape. One collapsed in 1957, spurring on redevelopment efforts.

My colleague Jesse Rifkin, who also attended the lecture, made note of the fact that Front Street and the East Side had 10 of Hartford's 12 known brothels in the 1890s. The development also didn't move swiftly, taking nearly a decade to begin construction.

Initially, Constitution Plaza was praised architecturally, but it ultimately came under intense criticism because it was isolated from downtown. Scappaticci said part of the problem was a pedestrian thoroughfare connecting it to Main Street was never built, making it tough for retailers to survive. Housing also was scrapped, turning the plaza into an office park, with the exception of a hotel.

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Constitution Plaza has fared better under the recent stewardship of GE Capital and developer Richard Cohen, which own most of the plaza. The partners have invested millions in renovations in the last decade. Office occupancy is at 82 percent within the plaza, healthy for a downtown that has been at or nearly 30-percent overall vacancy for two years.

The recent foreclosure filing against the part of plaza owned by GE Capital and Cohen was prompted by the partners being unable to reach a refinancing agreement on a \$60 million mortgage.

The raised plaza design was characteristic of Urban Renewal, which sought to remove pedestrians from street level, creating gleaming surroundings. Creating a massive new development also was meant to signal to world the city was modern and going places.

Soon, however, it was discovered that the raised plaza made it feel less accessible and more difficult to reach. In retrospect, the older buildings that were torn down are now prized by cities, bringing character to streetscapes. Neighborhoods and people living in and around a city's center also are now considered essential to a city's ability to thrive.



Constitution Plaza replaced the Front Street neighborhood.
Courant File Photo.

Christopher Wigren, deputy director of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, acknowledged that Front Street certainly had its troubles.

But “we learned that tearing down everything and starting from scratch doesn’t work,” said Wigren, during a panel discussion that followed Scappaticci’s talk.

Did you live in Hartford's Front Street neighborhood? What are your memories? Where did you move when the area was demolished?



If you enjoyed this article, please consider sharing it!



34 Responses to *hartford's constitution plaza: mistake or something else?*

*"Much of original Co
never built, includin
— kennethgosselin*



ricbee says:

August 1, 2012 at 11:05 pm

It destroyed the heart & soul of Hartford by emptying it of the people who kept it alive. Businesses with no customers only commuters.

REPLY



evan says:

August 2, 2012 at 6:23 am

Hartford now devoid of foot traffic did wipe out neighborhood after neighborhood during the 1960s revitalizations. Not isolated to Hartford but New London as well and others.

It has been said that in the 1960s everyone was tired of the old style, old buildings and wanted modern and new. NOW what is modern and new is old and ugly. Faceless, cold and devoid of a pulse.

What is old and now cherished and drives new business, new residents and a pulse. Newport, Portland, ME, Boston, New York (yes SoHo, Chelsea) , providence etc... are attractions because of the old that harbors new ideas. Hartford has a handful of relics. The Twain house, Stowe and Butler house among a handful of survivors. A row of victorian brownstones still stands and are sought after but Hartford like New London wiped out it`s past for a shiny modern new future via redevelopment chasing out the residents who shopped, lived and gave the area it`s pulse and left those who could not afford to flee to fend for themselves. Left without tax revenues and residents... cities jumped on HUD and sec.8 projects to re-inhabit. These have become beacons of what not to do.

Preservation efforts were limited then and I hope now developers think more "pulse" and more "vibrance" than they did when they demolished much of our past.

Summed up... Hartford is still a beautiful city, has parks and trees but is empty and has no pulse. Corporate captains need again to call the downtown home until this happens... tumbleweeds will continue to roll through the streets of a once great city.

REPLY



Paul says:

August 2, 2012 at 6:23 am

On balance Constitution Plaza was a huge mistake! A grandiose effort to redefine a neighborhood which has been a failure for the past 50 plus years!

REPLY

Dave says:



August 2, 2012 at 8:07 am

The problem with Constitution Plaza is and was –no housing. A mixed use development with 200-400 apartments would have made Constitution Plaza a 24-hour neighborhood. It would have supported retail and a restaurant. It would have turned a night and week end dead zone into a lively place, the kind of hub the city wanted.

Amazingly, 60 years later, the city still has not learned that lesson. Front Street is a repeat of the mistakes of Constitution Plaza. Mixed use developments have thrived all over the country. Without housing Front Street is a strip mall, Constitution Plaza is an office park.

People make cities. People, not buildings. If Constitution Plaza had been built with a housing component, it would have been a tremendous success and a source of pride for the city.

REPLY



kho says:

August 2, 2012 at 10:15 am

This makes absolute sense. Thank you for being probably the only one on here with a brain.

REPLY



Ashley says:

August 3, 2012 at 12:33 am

Dead on.

REPLY



moreresidential says:

August 2, 2012 at 8:13 am

Is completeing the original vision out of the question?...build or renovate for apartments and store fronts and the Plaza will come alive...connect to main street the way it was meant. This all sounds disturbingly familiar to what is going on at Front Street now...forgetting about the residential=collapse. Everything needs to be done at the same time and perhaps small building by small building if the money isn't there to do that grandiose strip mall that sits there now...

REPLY



moreresidential says:

August 2, 2012 at 8:15 am

Wow Dave....are we onn the same wave length or what!? I just posted and saw your post after I did...It is abvious to us...why not to others???

REPLY

**mark** says:

August 2, 2012 at 8:31 am

It was a tragic mistake that destroyed a city forever! The river through the city was covered. Housing was destroyed. Highways were erected that cut off the waterfront. All for what? The best neighborhoods in NYC were once drug infested, prostitute hang outs. Look at Chelsea, Tribeca and Greenwich Village. You know why they are the most expensive parts of the city today? They retained the beautiful historic nature of the architecture and the neighborhoods.

REPLY

**Dazedandbemused** says:

August 2, 2012 at 9:45 am

I would characterize Constitution Plaza as a total failure – a classic example of architects thinking that they can modify human behavior by creating the right design.

But at the same time, if you're going to mourn Front Street then do it in context. In 1957 the South End was a vibrant Italian neighborhood, Frog Hollow was a vibrant French-Canadian neighborhood and vibrant Jewish neighborhoods existed in the North End. Those days are now gone, and it is not realistic to think that 55 years later Front Street would be anything like it was back then.

REPLY

**Kenneth R. Gosselin** says:

August 2, 2012 at 10:29 am

Do you think the planned conversion of the old hotel into apartments will help?

REPLY

**MattL** says:

August 2, 2012 at 11:18 am

Converting the hotel into apartments will definitely help; but it has to be complimented by venues such as stores in the area, shopping, etc in that vicinity to entice people to move there. I lived downtown for about 5 years and enjoyed it. Although there was not a major grocery store near me, the fact there were a few small corner stores and restaurants in my area helped alot. Like someone said earlier, people make cities

REPLY

**Rob** says:

August 8, 2012 at 12:42 pm

We also need that new building where broadcast house used to stand. That developer was last talking about apartments combined with offices for his

company. Do we know the status of that? Two apartment buildings better than one!

REPLY



Kevin Miner says:

August 2, 2012 at 11:01 am

Is Front Street overly romanticized? Good question. Did Jane Jacobs overly “romanticize” the slums of Manhattan’s Lower East Side when Robert Moses proposed to demolishing said neighborhood to make room for the Lower Manhattan Expressway?

The parallels to Front Street and the Lower East Side are very similar: a slum neighborhood targeted for improvement via a very costly government project to modernize the area. One idea was green-lighted; the other, soundly rejected.

Today, the Lower East Side is an ultra-expensive neighborhood. The median price for a house currently stands at \$800,000. Could Front Street have endured a similar transformation, if left alone rather than fallen victim to the wrecking ball?

REPLY



Chris Fedukowski says:

August 2, 2012 at 8:13 pm

Very well said. Contrary to the author’s thesis, there is nothing “gray” about Constitution Plaza – its design is flawed and the trend it began of demolishing neighborhoods resulted in the downward spiral of all of Hartford’s neighborhoods. I have very vague memories of the neighborhood before its demolition – going to the Polish and Italian bakeries on Sunday morning, etc. Filled with people, cars, activity. Only memory of Constitution Plaza is the yearly trek to see the Christmas lights a few times, and then the rest of the time wondering why this expanse of vacant space was ever built. Hartford wasn’t alone in its rush to urban renewal, but has continued down this misguided path long after other cities have learned to value and invest in the historic neighborhoods and buildings. Let’s hope the next generation of leaders will have the vision and courage to admit mistakes and learn from Jane Jacobs and current advocates of place-based economics and urban planning.

REPLY



Greg says:

August 2, 2012 at 11:08 am

I think everything started going downhill after WFSB moved to Rocky Hill.

REPLY

Heatmiser says:



August 2, 2012 at 11:13 am

I remember visiting Constitution Plaza a few times as a very young child from about 1967 to '71 to see the Christmas light display and hating the place. It seemed to me to be a place where people just shouldn't be – very cold and uninviting (and scary to a 5 year-old). Who would you want to be around all that square concrete? Even the benches were made of concrete.

I do remember thinking the Pheonix building was really cool though.

REPLY



Jeff says:

August 2, 2012 at 11:15 am

My father told me about the neighborhood that was there before the Plaza, (and how Hartford looked before the highways were built). I can't really imagine there was ever a neighborhood there! It seems downtown can never be connected to the river front since these two projects were built.

REPLY



Tony says:

August 2, 2012 at 11:24 am

Not only was the Plaza a dismal infrastructure failure, the Civic Center, Riverfront Recapture, the new Front Street, the Boat House and of course the Convention Center are all expensive failures that were built on the backs of CT taxpayers. This region's so-called leaders keep making the same mistakes, believing that we are still the insurance capital of the world and impervious to recession.

Instead of first focusing on rebuilding our regional economy, they spent multi-millions building lofty (literal and figurative) and mostly inaccessible monuments in a business deficient ghost town.

REPLY



Phil Hickey says:

August 4, 2012 at 11:37 am

The so called leaders think more "Brick and Mortar projects" are going to save Hartford. Who in their right mind would want to raise a family in Hartford?

REPLY



Marc Nicol says:

August 7, 2012 at 10:00 am

The Riverfront Recapture and Boat House are far from expensive failures built upon the backs of tax payers.

Riverfront Recapture is a successful not for profit that manages the Riverfront Parks for the City of Hartford and the Town of East Hartford with

less than 20% of its annual operating costs derived from taxpayers. Since 1981, the organization has raised over \$30 million in private funding for the parks and their daily operations. And with almost 1 million annual visitors attending free public events, activities and sporting events, it is safe to say the parks are far from a failure.

The boathouse was constructed entirely with private dollars and welcomes more than 400 adult and 100 high school rowers (many whom row for free utilizing additional private contributions) on a regular basis. The second floor banquet facility hosts more than 100 private events per year, with the net proceeds used to support other free park activities.

REPLY



Lucy says:

August 2, 2012 at 11:25 am

I just found this article from 4 years ago that answers in more detail what was originally to be included in building Constitution Plaza. So sad that a major downtown company changed it all...

http://espanol.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/History/htfd_courant_072207.asp

REPLY



mike says:

August 2, 2012 at 1:44 pm

when the hotel is converted to apartments, this area will be much better off. that project includes 11,000 SF of retail that hopefully will help add additional life besides the new tv studio.

HOWEVER... in order to make the area a success the AI Engineers building needs to happen, and it would need to include both residential and office space. this is the additional 24 hour density truly needed to pick up the plaza.

I am assuming that CT river plaza will be acquired by the state and filled with 2000 odd state workers.

the corner of the plaza facing North has too many low density buildings for a city center as well. the NW corner is 1 story, and thats just silly.

REPLY



Duane says:

August 2, 2012 at 4:44 pm

Why do the 2000 state workers have to be odd?

REPLY



dan says:

August 2, 2012 at 9:23 pm

The state workers do not have to be odd, but many of them are anyways. imagine if they were all even. (how could you ever expect to get even working for the state?, unless you were the head of the UConn police?)

REPLY



Catspaw says:

August 2, 2012 at 4:57 pm

Wishing Front Street back into existence isn't the solution to Constitution Plaza's issues.

Read my comment at:

<http://courantblogs.com/ct-real-estate/hartfords-constitution-plaza-falls-into-foreclosure/#comment-2119>

As others here have pointed out the designers and current owners of properties at the Plaza have created a wonderful office park without anything of interest to ordinary people.

Amazingly not a single business looks out on the river and no one will risk their lives walking along the vacant and incomplete river walk.

The empty storefronts and cement corridor behind the riverfront structures completes a picture of a planning ethos that condemns the area to perpetual twilight. (We also note how the brick crosswalks are already crumbling to the point of failure.)

At this point the public is sick of the endless promises and taxpayer funded rescue plans.

The Plaza represents a beautiful stage created for a show that will never open. Let it go.

Maybe Tom Condon will suggest another expensive fantasy junket like the one he seeks to waste more money on to sell the Busway to citizens who don't want it and will never ride on it.

Apparently the answer to every problem in Hartford is to give fancy expensive trips to rich guys to sell dumb ideas to a public that has long since lost interest in the City of Hartford.

REPLY



Marc Nicol says:

August 7, 2012 at 9:37 am

The Riverfront Park area is not the desolate place you are imagining with almost 1 million visitors each of the last two years. And with continued pleasant weather, great, free public events and sporting activities, the parks will likely see a record number of visitors again this year.

Those that visit the Riverfront know that the area is the one of the safest in Greater Hartford with an average of 1 police reportable crime per year over the past 5 years. Quite contrary to the urban legend started in suburbia and fed upon by those without firsthand knowledge.

Instead of imagining what is happening along the Riverfront, you should take an hour to see what has already been accomplished. You might just be surprised.

REPLY



Catspaw says:

August 7, 2012 at 11:29 am

Is the area referenced the leg of the walk extending south of the amphitheater stage on the Hartford side?

Having walked the route for over five years from its inception and to be greeted again and again by a trap rock shelf in front of the Colt's building at the Hog River conduit substantiates a fair critique on the impression of danger.

Has the commenter discovered a coffee shop or basic restaurant on either side where one can enjoy a view, buy a sandwich or simple cup of coffee?

Perhaps a brief list of these facilities that attract residents again and again may be presented?

One wonders why these conditions remain a decade after the major building effort ended.

No one benefits from pointless sniping; being able to take fair criticism seriously might promote a resolution to the weaknesses of this project.

In any case the series of cultural events are not criticized nor those who enjoy those efforts.

Let the good reader benefit from a pedestrian traffic count that will clearly illustrate the daily utilization of this asset.

A vacant river walk certainly produces few police incidents but that may only confirm the limited appeal of this as yet incomplete attraction.

REPLY



Ashley says:

August 3, 2012 at 12:36 am

It's the disconnection from the riverfront that continues to be the biggest problem. Downtown feels cold, isolated, and dark. Other mid-sized cities on rivers have built with riverfront access and views in mind. If you stand at Constitution Plaza or the Old State House, you're walled in around you by skyscrapers and all you see looking east is the bridge and more concrete. It needs

to be opened up more. I like to bring friends from out-of-state downtown for walking tours when they come to visit, and the number one thing they always say is that they can't believe we have a river that we're entirely separate from. They're on to something.

REPLY



Phil Hickey says:

August 4, 2012 at 11:30 am

Ashley, the majority of modern American cities have a beltway that goes around the city with exits at various locations. Hartford has two highways leading to it. One that cuts the city in 1/2 and the other that cuts the city off from the river. Poor planning.

REPLY



Heatmiser says:

August 6, 2012 at 10:07 am

The idea behind the original interstate system in the 50's was that the purpose of a highway should be to bring you TO the city. The problem with this becomes evident when you try to travel across our state (for example from Vernon to Farmington) and you have to go through downtown Hartford to do so. Not only is your trip delayed because of being exposed to city traffic, but you yourself are contributing to the city's overall traffic problem. The highways should have been designed to get you NEAR the city, with feeders and beltways to handle city-specific traffic. I think of this every time I drive through Hartford (or New Haven, Bridgeport, Stamford, Springfield or Waterbury).

REPLY



Phil Hickey says:

August 4, 2012 at 11:25 am

It's my understanding that Constitution Plaza destroyed the vibrant Front Street Neighborhood and started the mass exodus of the city. Constitution Plaza is a huge white elephant as are most "renewal" projects in the city. The plaza itself was the end of Hartford. The final nail in Hartford's coffin was the stabbing that happened at the Italian Festival on Franklin Avenue in the early 80's.

REPLY



Salvatore J. Presutti says:

August 8, 2012 at 10:23 am

I came to Hartford as a six year old immigrant in 1955. My first home was a third floor walk-up flat on Front Street, approximately located where the Convention Center now stands.

Front Street was wiped out by a committee of corporate leaders and business interests under the banner of urban renewal in order to replace it with Constitution Plaza, beautiful in its day and yet sterile and devoid of people after 5 p.m. Unfortunately, the components of people and neighborhood businesses which are now regarded as absolute necessities to recreate a vibrant Front Street were driven out of the area and scattered about. Only someone who experienced and witnessed the effects of this and other urban renewal efforts that were promulgated and administered from the top of industry and government can truly understand the effects of the decisions made.

When the Constitution Plaza redevelopment work got underway, my family moved to another third floor walk-up in the Windsor Street area. It was behind the State Theatre. People came there from all over to watch real boxing and wrestling matches. My parents grew vegetables on rented land located on the other side of the Bulkeley Bridge, in East Hartford. At harvest time we walked our produce over the bridge and sold them to a small Italian grocer, today is known as the D&D Market.

Then in 1949, Robert Moses consulted on Hartford's arterial problems for a group of area insurance companies. His recommendation on the building of I-91 was to use urban renewal to wipe away the Windsor Street neighborhood. Once again, my family and hundreds of others, along with our small businesses, were driven out. As a result, the D & D Market moved into its current location on Franklin Avenue and the Windsor Street area has never recovered from that redevelopment effort.

REPLY



Catspaw says:

August 8, 2012 at 3:28 pm

Marvelous telling of this chapter in Hartford's decent.

The good reader may also note that the Plaza is private property. Again, reworking a new 'Front Street' isn't the solution, not that the knowledgeable writer suggested this.

What is provided is an excellent object lesson in the acquisition of the river front by private interests to eliminate examination of its use and value to the larger community.

Essentially a spigot held shut against any innovation that doesn't serve the financial needs of the owner. The city can go hang.

Quite a good joke really. A multimillion dollar acquisition, paid for by public funds and held as hostage to distant interests who neither care for these critiques or practical outcomes.

Hartford is full of these wonderful tales. One of which had a hole ripped in the side of it for a decade and glared at the city as City Hall somehow missed the blight.

Perhaps the Plaza also represents a blight of a different sort that now features a three story cement hole to greet the resident and visitor.

Bye bye Capitol West hello cement hole recaptured from the riverfront. Those wiser than us know it is all done for our own good. We're obviously just too stupid to thank them for all the help.

REPLY

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