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A Nowhere Between Two Somewheres:
The Church Street South Project and Urban Renewal in New Haven

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Part I. Introduction

“It is altogether too easy to forget the New Haven of a decade ago” New Haven’s Mayor Richard C. Lee began as he addressed the members of his Citizens Action Commission in 1965. “Neither our eyes, nor our memories are any longer jolted by the vision of the old produce market that had operated near the Railroad Station for more than half a century. The old market was a tangle of stress, often so congested that normal business was impossible. Most business was conducted from the tailgates of trucks. This was a truck market in every sense of the word, with little tax return to the City and few permanent jobs. The buildings that were used were obsolete and inefficient, relics of a bygone age. Streets were too often littered with refuse and filth and infested with rats and vermin. This was the sight that greeted visitors to New Haven as they left the railroad station. One can hardly imagine a less impressive entrance to a city.” Lee had come before the CAC, a group of New Haven’s business heavyweights that supported his goal to rebuild the city, with a proposal to replace the tangled market with a new development that would be “the showplace of twentieth century architecture.”

With these evocative words, Mayor Lee introduced the Church Street South housing project to the business leaders of New Haven, Connecticut. By emphasizing the blight of the removed market and potential of the new project, Lee portrayed the benefits of “slum clearance”: the city could clear the land that was a detriment to the city while building a new, prestigious development. He painted the housing development as not only an architectural credit for New Haven, but an economic boom as well. Lee’s reference to the tax-paying properties of the land, though brief, speaks volumes about his economic intentions. In 1965, when Lee gave the speech, the Redevelopment Agency intended for Church Street South to be a luxury-housing complex to be designed by world-renowned architect, Mies van der Rohe. As built, however, Church Street South was a very different development: a low-rise, village-style, apartment complex for low-income residents. In this essay I discuss the evolution of the Church Street

South territory and changing land uses as a reflection of the changing objectives of New Haven’s Redevelopment Agency and urban renewal program.

The small parcel of land that ultimately housed Church Street South was part of a larger urban renewal project in New Haven: the Church Street Project. Unlike the previous Oak Street Connector project, an urban highway project that linked New Haven to the emerging system of interstate highways, or the contemporaneous Wooster Square Neighborhood rehabilitation project, the Church Street Project, first introduced in 1955, was almost entirely aimed at rebuilding the commercial core of the city, as opposed to improving New Haven’s housing stock. The Church Street Project had to central objectives: increasing the tax base and reversing the downward retail trends that led shoppers to the suburbs of New Haven and out of the urban core. The Redevelopment Agency viewed revamping the aging retail district in New Haven as the means to restore commercial success to the city.

As part of the original Church Street Project, the land across from Union Station was slated for a 19-acre commercial park zoned exclusively for business and industry use, and not housing. In 1965, however, the Redevelopment Agency announced a revision to the Church Street Project: as Mayor Lee announced to the CAC, it would be programmed for luxury housing and would be designed by Mies van der Rohe, the prestigious modernist architect. The process of amending the original Church Street Project was not unprecedented; urban renewal projects often dragged on for many years. Urban renewal officials responded to the shifting nature of a city and often altered their sense of what types of land uses would be most successful. Such was the case in New Haven. The Eighth Amendment to the Church Street Plan announced the decision to annul the scheduled commercial park and, in its place, build a luxury housing development. The plans for the southern area of the Church Street Project would change once again in 1967 when Lee announced that the city would forgo Mies’ luxury housing development in order to implement a new plan for low-income housing – Church Street South – to be designed by Charles Moore, then the Dean of the Yale School of Art and Architecture. My interest in this essay is to chart the evolving plans for the Church Street South site, an area that had long been targeted by urban planners who sought to improve the built environment of the city.
For years, prior to the advent of urban renewal, city planners had sought to remove the aging wholesale market due to the land’s valuable location. By allowing access to the train station and sitting only blocks away from the central business district, the land carried much economic potential as a link between these two urban nodes. Yet, despite its strategic positioning, politicians and investors alike had avoided development in the area, allowing the land to develop in an incremental and unplanned way. In this way the land housing the wholesale marketplace, the future site of Church Street South became known as the nowhere between two somewheres.2

For more than five decades prior to the announcement of the Church Street Project, city planners hoped to redevelop the marketplace as a great thoroughfare, connecting the railroad station with the central business district. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Cass Gilbert’s 1910 Civic Improvement Plan for New Haven envisioned a grandiose boulevard radiating directly outward from the station, reminiscent of Haussmann’s boulevard in Paris from a generation earlier.3 Maurice Rotival, who drafted a city plan for New Haven in 1941, similarly hoped to construct an extension of Church Street that would become New Haven’s “Fifth Avenue” – an elegant commercial boulevard leading directly into the heart of the city.

By the eve of urban renewal, the marketplace had aged into a chaotic eyesore in New Haven: urban planners and citizens alike viewed it as a “problem,” an impediment to the city’s success, obstructing commercial expansion. With the arrival of urban renewal and the election of Dick Lee to mayoral came the opportunity to clear the market and develop the land into a more profitable use. Dick Lee was among the first mayors in the country to pioneer urban renewal techniques. Lee and his redeveloper administrator, Ed Logue, viewed the marketplace in similar terms as their preceding planners: a barrier to the city’s progress and as a site of great potential. Logue wrote, “We believe that the site which is available in the filled land for the market is an unparalleled one from the point of view of accessibility both to the New Haven community and to superior rail, water and highway transportation

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Thus, the Redevelopment Agency initiated the plans for a commercial park, and later a luxury housing complex. What was built, however, was not a high-end, luxury housing development that the Redevelopment Agency had hoped would bolster the economic vitality in the central business district. Instead, the concrete walls of a low-income housing project rose in the Church Street South area.

The change in program represented a shift in the objectives and priorities of the Redevelopment Agency. The transforming housing program was the result of two burgeoning conflicts in New Haven. First, the Redevelopment Agency was responding to public dissatisfaction with the declining number of low-income housing units in the city; a consequence of the high volume of “slum” buildings being taken by eminent domain to make way for renewal projects. The displacement of low-income citizens in New Haven coincided with an emerging national uproar over the issue and escalated into a cry for the construction of new low-income housing in the city, the original intent of the federal urban renewal program. Second, the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum across the nation and in New Haven. Activist groups in New Haven brought racist housing practices into the limelight. They argued that the denial of decent housing made it impossible to break the cycle of inequities endured due to their race. The combination of these two rising tensions served as the catalyst for the radical change by the Redevelopment Agency.

The change in housing program from luxury to low-income represented not only a need for fair housing practices and additional low-income housing, but also a new willingness to listen to citizens on the part of the Redevelopment Agency. The Redevelopment Agency’s choice to forgo the economic benefits provided by an upper-income community has powerful implications for interpretations of urban renewal politics. The evolution of the Church Street South site allows for an intimate look into the supposedly doctrinaire machinery of urban renewal housing, revealing a more adaptive approach than is typically offered in the literature regarding urban renewal. More specifically, the transformation of Church Street South’s housing program challenges the portrayal of urban renewal as a monolithic

4 Memorandum from Ed Logue to Pat, March 9,1955, Series I: Mayoral Files, Richard C. Lee Papers, Group 318, Box 4, Folder 105: Correspondence: CAC – Market, 1955, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
political apparatus seeking to exile the poorest of New Haven citizens. Instead, the project reveals an enterprising administration and Redevelopment Agency, which, while aspiring to restore New Haven to its once prestigious position, learned in this instance to listen to their citizens, bend to their needs, and balance aspirations with political reality. While the ultimate design of Church Street South may have left much to be desired, the project ultimately demonstrates the responsiveness of the Redevelopment Agency to local concerns over housing and a return to the roots of urban renewal as a housing policy.

**Part II. Setting the Stage for Urban Renewal**

When Lee took office in 1954, New Haven was on the brink of widespread physical change. Both the legal and financial mechanisms offered by urban renewal legislation and the role of a tenacious and daring Dick Lee allowed urban renewal to find a home in New Haven. Urban renewal, stemming from the 1949 Housing Act, is the umbrella concept describing the modernization of a city’s physical plant – its housing, infrastructure, transportation, industry, service, and commercial centers. The housing shortage existing in the postwar years incited the 1949 Act, which had two primary tenets: to expand eminent domain and to allow federal subsidy to buy, clear, and resell land. The federal government would allot, for approved projects, a capital grant worth two-thirds of the total project cost (the difference between the expenditures of demolition and building and the profits of reselling the land), leaving the city to pay for only one-third of their renewal project. The aim of the urban renewal program was to improve the housing stock in each city enough to replace slum housing with decent, hygienic housing. It emphasized slum clearance and did little to encourage comprehensive city planning. The projects were intended to be “predominantly residential in character” both before and after clearance. However, the 1954 Housing Act made this requirement slightly more flexible, allowing for a commercially centered project like the Church Street Project.

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The Housing Act of 1949, however, failed to provoke a spike in development in New Haven or around the country. Five years after the Act was passed, only 87 projects were under construction across the nation and just $146 million of the $500 million allotted by the U.S. government for the program had been obligated.\textsuperscript{6} The sluggish response to the Act was mirrored in New Haven. In 1950, a Democratic alderman suggested that the city take advantage of the Act and establish a redevelopment agency. While current Mayor Celetano did not impede efforts to implement urban renewal policies, fearful of aggravating his Democratic base, he did little to press for action, hesitant to start on such a risky political path. It was not until Mayor Lee entered city hall that New Haven would take any significant steps towards rebuilding.

Coinciding with the initiation of Lee’s sixteen-year term as Mayor, the passage of the 1954 Housing Act made way for the commercially focused Church Street Project. The amendment to the 1949 Housing Act allowed for several significant changes. First, the 1954 Act removed emphasis from complete clearance by providing funding to the rehabilitation and conservation of decaying areas. This change speaks to the evolution of thought regarding urban renewal program across the country and an entire era of “slum clearance.” Second, the Act introduced “Section 220” and “Section 221” mortgages, which allocated mortgage insurance for rehabilitation, new construction, and housing for displaced families. Third, in order to receive funding, cities were required to present a “workable program,” in their application – a comprehensive plan including housing and building codes, detailed analyses of individual neighborhoods, and a system of implementation.\textsuperscript{7} Finally, and most relevant to the Church Street Project, the 1954 amendment provided the “10 percent exception,” which allowed 10 percent of federal funds appropriated to urban renewal to be allocated to projects that had only a “substantial number” of substandard dwellings. In other words, the government no longer required projects to be residential in

\textsuperscript{7} Foard and Fefferman, 656.
In 1956, another amendment allowed displaced individuals to receive relocation payments from the government and incentivized housing programs to give preference to the elderly. While the 1949 Housing Act set out to improve the housing conditions of America’s most impoverished citizens, politicians across the country confused the Act’s intentions as being synonymous with increasing their city’s tax base. This was, of course, partially because the two are directly related. An improvement in any city’s housing stock creates more desirable neighborhoods with effects proliferating to surrounding residential and commercial areas, which in turn attracts higher-income citizens, increasing the city’s tax base. However, there is a distinct line to be drawn. Many urban politicians began to prioritize their ambitions for creating an ever-growing tax base over improving the housing conditions of their most impoverished citizens forcibly living in tenements and slums.

During the beginning years of Dick Lee’s mayoralty, New Haven citizens grew accustomed to urban renewal in their city. Allan Talbot, the author of an account of Dick Lee’s political career, captured this optimism eloquently when he wrote: “Under [Lee’s] administration urban renewal became as comforting as a new home, as useful as a handsome new school, as liberal as an anti-poverty program, as commercial as a department store, as economic as a new industrial park, as convenient as a new expressway, and as understandable as a neighborhood playground.” Lee’s Newhallville roots helped to engender support and alleviate discomfort with renewal among New Haven’s citizens. Growing up, Lee watched the stagnation of his city transform into obsolescence. None of New Haven’s problems were new or particularly perturbing; they were old problems compounding over time. A shrinking tax base, decreasing retail sales, and aging physical plant all acted to repel private sector investment and development from the city, thereby furthering New Haven’s relative decline. Lee watched as Mayor John Murphy’s Depression-era frugality aggravated the atrophy and as his mid-century successor Mayor William Celetano’s inactivity cemented it.

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8 Foard and Fefferman, 657.
Lee first ran for mayor in 1949, losing to Mayor Celetano by a margin of 700 votes. In 1951, Lee anted up and ran again, this time only to lose by two single votes.10 In 1953 Lee changed his message, focusing his campaign on the physical renewal of New Haven. While no one author has offered evidence to rationalize Lee’s change in strategy, Talbot suggested that Lee “needed to attach his personal dynamism to a public cause.”11 Thus, Lee went on the attack attributing New Haven’s blight, ineffective public services, and decaying school system on Celetano’s indolence while simultaneously amplifying the voice of dissatisfied citizen groups. Meanwhile, Celetano made a serious misstep when he suggested that New Haven’s central Green be transformed into a parking lot, foreshadowing the enormous departure in ideologies and dexterity existing between the two candidates.12 Finally, in 1953 at the age of 37, Dick Lee was elected Mayor Richard C. Lee by a plurality of 3,582 votes, ushering in what is widely considered to be the most productive urban renewal administration in American history.13

Lee’s dedication to renewing New Haven surely had many roots. Yet, one moment in particular stood out in Lee’s mind: his first visit to one of the Oak Street slum buildings, the neighborhood which would later host New Haven’s initial urban renewal project. Lee explained:

I came out from one of those homes on Oak Street, and I sat on the curb and I was just as sick as a puppy. Why, the smell of this building; it had no electricity, it had no gas, it had kerosene lamps, light had never seen those corridors in generations. The smells… It was just awful and I got sick. And there, there I really began… right there was when I began to tie in all these ideas we’d been practicing in city planning of years in terms of the human benefits that a program like this could reap for a city… In the two-year period (before the 1953 election) I began to put it together with the practical application… And I began to realize that while we had lots of people interested in doing something for the city they were all working at cross purposes. There was no unity of approach.14

This moment where Lee determined the eradication of slums in New Haven to be a prerequisite for New Haven’s success proved to be pivotal not only for Lee, but also for New Haven. While there is debate over how far Lee’s political influence extended in municipal decision-making, it is widely agreed

10 Talbot, 3.
11 Ibid, 9.
12 Wolfinger, 173.
13 Talbot, 13.
that Lee held more power than the average mayor. In *Who Governs?*, Robert Dahl’s famous study of municipal politics in New Haven, Dahl asserts that Lee formed an “executive-centered coalition” in which Lee was “a member of all the major coalitions, and in each of them he was one of the two or three men of highest influence.”

Lee dedicated enormous amounts of energy and manpower to reconstructing New Haven and, gradually, the city became the poster child for urban renewal. Federal officials encouraged politicians to study New Haven, and Dick Lee rose as one of the country’s foremost experts on urban renewal. Lee repeatedly testified before congressional committees, in addition to serving as Chairman of the Urban Renewal Committee of the American Municipal Association and President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. An article appearing in *The New York Times* in 1965 wrote, “in City Hall on Church Street, and in Washington, officials are confident that New Haven has perfected the tools of urban renewal.”

The Secretary of Labor, Willard Wirtz, declared that New Haven “was the greatest success story in the history of the world,” and the Federal Housing and Home Finance Administrator, Robert C. Weaver, remarked, “I think New Haven is coming closest to our dream of a slumless city.” These comments by prominent federal officials point to New Haven’s perceived success in condemning and clearing land in order to “renew” the city.

Lee enlarged both the City Plan Department and the Redevelopment Agency, while increasing appropriations for Maurice Rotival, until the city was spending $250,000 a year on these three endeavors. Lee hired Ed Logue to serve as Development Administrator, a position Lee created specifically for Logue with an executive order. Lee announced that Logue would direct all city functions regarding the development program, effectively putting Logue in charge of the Redevelopment Agency,

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16 Talbot, 157.
19 Kaplan, 47.
20 Wolfinger, 176.
the City Plan Department, the Department of Traffic and Parking, the Bureau of Environmental Sanitation and the Building Department. Logue wasted no time hiring a team of his own. Within six months he hired a new director of the Redevelopment Agency, Ralph Taylor, previously an Assistant Secretary at the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Together, Logue and Taylor hired five more talented and competent young men: Thomas Appleby, Harold Grabino, Chuck Shannon, Robert Hazen, and later, Mel Adams. Taylor, who had already memorized the federal regulations, combined with Appleby and Adams, who had helped to draft some of the urban renewal policies, understood the financial incentives provided to cities. This group, known to Lee as “the Kremlin,” and to the New Haven Register as “the whiz kids,” was unusually talented and dedicated. Together, they brought in an unprecedented amount of money from Washington and forever changed the New Haven landscape.

New Haven so disproportionately claimed federal dollars for a period of time that it became known as “Fund City,” playing off the popular title for the neighboring New York City, “Fun City.” By the close of 1965, around the time the Church Street South project was being formulated, New Haven was estimated to have obtained federal urban renewal allocations equivalent to $745 per person. This per capita amount was almost three times as large as Newark, the next highest, at $277 per head. When Lee was asked how New Haven had achieved its well-publicized feats in 1966 on Meet the Press, he responded, “We study programs as they evolve in Washington…and in some cases write the legislation. And then, when the money is passed out, we are there with a bushel basket.”

Part III. Early Projects and the Church Street Project

Guided by national policy, Lee and the Redevelopment Agency made the mistake of viewing the “slum” as a location instead of a condition. The urban-renewal era conception of slums as “cancer” that “spread” throughout cities infecting both residents and businesses is evident in New Haven’s first urban

22 Talbot, 160.
23 Asbell, 40.
renewal project: the Oak Street Project. Indeed, as the only urban renewal project to precede the Church Street Project in New Haven, the Oak Street Project exemplifies the Redevelopment Agency’s early belief that clearance was the “cure” to New Haven’s slums.

The Oak Street Neighborhood was at one point New Haven’s most densely populated area. The 42-acre site, once hosting a labyrinth of tenements, markets, mom-and-pop shops, and ethnic and cultural organizations, was cleared to make way for the new Oak Street Connector.\(^{25}\) The Connector would link interstate highways I-91 and I-95 in the heart of New Haven, allowing suburbanites direct access to New Haven’s downtown while simultaneously expunging the area of 900 households and 250 businesses.\(^{26}\) The Redevelopment Agency defended this widespread demolition by arguing that all of New Haven’s neighborhoods were “mutually dependent” and that the removal of the Oak Street neighborhood was part of a City-Wide Master Plan to create a slum-free city.\(^{27}\) The Oak Street Project was designed in opposition to the spirit of urban renewal. While New Haven’s housing stock certainly demanded the removal of tenements, the Oak Street Project resulted in an enormous net loss of low-income housing in the city without any advancement in the housing stock.

The Church Street Project was distinct from the previously approved projects in New Haven and across the country in one crucial characteristic: it was, at its core, a commercial project. While the land being demolished contained scattered residential buildings, the Redevelopment Agency viewed the most salient land in the project area to be the four-block stretch on Chapel Street that formed the heart of the retail district. While the demolished buildings may have been of a mixed nature, the Redevelopment Agency planned only commercial developments in the Church Street Project prior to the announcement of Church Street South – a shopping complex, a hotel, and parking garages. Lee and the Redevelopment Agency had two commercial objectives in mind: first, to reverse declining retail trends and second, to attract higher-income residents opting for suburban life over New Haven.

\(^{27}\) Jackson, 36.
One objective of New Haven’s urban renewal program was to address the city’s shrinking tax base. A city’s tax base served as a measure of success relative to the surrounding cities and suburbs as well as a predictor for a city’s future ability to attract citizens and provide public services. For Dick Lee, a shrinking tax base was already a concern. As New Haven’s decay crept outwards, encompassing much of the city, upper-income residents left the city, opting for the surrounding suburbs that offered a more desirable residential environment. As a result of the shrinking consumer base, businesses closed and the city operated on a shrinking tax base. In order to maintain satisfactory public services, New Haven was forced to raise taxes, thereby increasing the cost of living and conducting business in the city as well as expediting the exodus to the suburbs. Thus, a vicious cycle acted to create a continually shrinking tax base in New Haven, which was visible in the census data: from 1940 to 1960 New Haven lost 16,000 residents while the surrounding area doubled its prewar population, gaining 120,000 residents. This trend was not unique to New Haven: 22 of 29 northeastern cities with populations greater than 100,000 experienced a population decline in the years 1950-1960. Compounding the consequences of a shrinking population were the socioeconomic differences separating suburb and city residents. As early as 1949, 55 percent of families living in New Haven had incomes less than $3,000, while the same was true of only 37 percent of the population in the surrounding area. A large contributing factor to this trend was the mass migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. In New Haven only 13 percent of the black heads of household were New Haven natives, whereas 74 percent were born in the South. Further, New Haven’s central business district, despite taking up less than one percent of the city’s land, accounted for more than one fifth of the city’s taxes. The Redevelopment Agency projected that the four blocks north of the Connector alone would raise annual tax revenue from $400,000 to $1,080,000. These four blocks served as the foundation of the Church Street Project; the

28 Wolfinger, 135.
29 Ibid, 135.
30 City of New Haven, Short Approach Master Plan, 1953.
32 Wolfinger, 298.
33 Ibid, 308.
stretch was both the main development and economic facet of the project, as well as the catalyst for the project.

The origination of the Church Street Project can be attributed to the demolition of one building: the Gamble-Desmond building. In June 1952, the Gamble-Desmond department store on Chapel Street went out of business, one more sign in a series of indicators pointing to the commercial decline in New Haven. The Harwell Corporation acquired the abandoned Gamble-Desmond building and demolished it, hoping to acquire the adjacent properties in order to develop a large retail complex. Unable to negotiate prices with the adjoining owners, however, the Harwell Corporation failed to acquire enough property for a successful retail complex. Thus, their dreams were put on hold.

Meanwhile, the empty lot left by the Gamble-Desmond building became increasingly disturbing to Lee and Logue and they began to view the lot as an opportunity to halt the business district’s decline. A 1956 survey revealed that 40 percent of shoppers in the New Haven area visited the city’s CBD less frequently than in previous years, while only 12 percent visited more frequently. In the neighboring suburb, Hamden, however, 56 percent of shoppers visited Hamden’s CBD more frequently while only 4 percent decreased their visits. New Haven’s experience was not unique. Similar to many older cities in the U.S., downtown New Haven had been laid out over a century ago. The postwar influx of automobiles and single-family homes did little to attract shoppers to the antiquated buildings and narrow streets intended for foot and horse traffic. Furthermore, New Haven lacked the new, attractive stores that suburban sites were claiming. Only a few years prior, the Sears Roebuck store left its locale in New Haven for a new, more spacious store in Hamden. In New Haven, more than half of the stores in CBD had been built before 1885. And so, America’s first cities began to suffer. During the years 1948-1954,

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34 Ibid, 309.
36 Ibid, 299.
New Haven’s retail sales downtown decreased five percent, while the surrounding area experienced a 31 percent increase.\textsuperscript{37}

After successfully landing federal funds for the Oak Street project, Logue began to search for another potential renewal site, and the Gamble-Desmond lot captured his attention. In his search to help the Harwell Corporation, Logue approached the well-known New York developer, Roger Stevens. In early 1955, Logue and Stevens explored the possibility of developing the lot, but Stevens concluded that it would not be worthwhile to develop just the Gamble-Desmond site for himself or for the city. Stevens argued that the cessation of decay and blight in the business district would require a much larger, multiblock development project, echoing contemporary logic which contended that large-scale, comprehensive projects were necessary to restore the magnetism of the urban core.\textsuperscript{38} He suggested the three blocks bounded by Chapel, Church, Temple and George Streets. Beginning in early 1955 and continuing for more than a year, Lee, Logue, and Stevens tried in vain to acquire the blocks for private development.

As the commercial aspect of the Church Street Project was slowly beginning to take form, New Haven’s remaining eight renewal study areas were being examined. Two of these were deemed equal in their need for remedy: the Wooster Square neighborhood and what was called the South Central area. The South Central district was a small, wedge-shaped area that began at Church and George Streets and continued south to the railroad station. The Redevelopment Agency defined the area to be “a cancer that has been spreading to the residential streets in the entire project area,” one that could only be cured through “a program that recognizes the essentiality of clearance and replanning.”\textsuperscript{39} Raymond Wolfinger, the research assistant to Robert Dahl, described the area in the following way: “The area was a maze of short, narrow streets, slums and the wholesale produce market. The buildings housing the 51 produce

\textsuperscript{38} Alison Isenberg, \textit{Downtown America: A history of the place and the people who made it} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 167.
\textsuperscript{39} South Central Renewal Area: Preliminary Project Report, September 4, 1956, Series XVIII: Projects, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 392: Projects Planning and Plan Amendments, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
merchants had been built for other purposes. They were badly dilapidated, infested with rats and vermin, and full of fire and sanitation hazards.40

The Redevelopment Agency realized that private development alone would not halt the city’s downward trend and concluded that the city’s newly expanded eminent domain powers could be of enormous use. Thus, during the summer of 1955, Logue amended the South Central district boundaries in the planning grant application to include the entirety of the area being discussed with Stevens, without telling anyone but the mayor.41 Logue predicted the additional blocks would eventually be excluded from the project, but included them as insurance against the growing possibility of Stevens’s failure to acquire the blocks for private development.

While the South Central district raised the residential criterion of the Church Street Project, the federal Urban Renewal Administration (URA) would have been well within its rights to decline a project that was so obviously aimed at commercial gain. The project was designed to cut through the wholesale produce market, decaying businesses and blighted residential buildings. To be built on the newly barren land was a logical street pattern and commercial park, vaguely defined to be anything but housing. This was in addition to the construction of the commercial oasis Stevens was planning a few blocks north, complete with a department store, a hotel and an enormous parking garage. Even with the 1954 amendment to the 1949 Housing Act, no project had passed through the federal URA without being truly residential in character. By expanding the boundaries of the South Central project area to include New Haven’s retail core, Logue and the Redevelopment Agency made the construction of a new downtown possible. With this decision, the Redevelopment Agency departed from the original intentions of the urban renewal legislation of providing decent housing for all and instead prioritized the city’s tax base and retail sales.

As one might expect, the inclusion of the four-block area north of the Connector proved to be controversial; the federal urban renewal program did not aim to ameliorate inefficient and antiquated

40 Wolfinger, 303.
41 Ibid, 304-5.
business districts. Additionally, being the second largest federal grant in the nation at the time, the project would be costly for the government. Federal and city officials debated over the inclusion of the four-block area north of the Connector for months. The area Stevens wished to develop, from Chapel to the new Connector was not blighted even though the plan called for the eradication of many sound buildings and businesses (fig. 1&2). The contemporary urban planning philosophy dictated that the restoration of downtown required the destruction of “old” downtown. The mandate for complete clearance of old and diverse stores from “Main Street” was fed by a new American infatuation with shopping malls and consumerism. Redevelopers dismissed any economic and aesthetic value these stores held, labeling them “obsolete,” and installing suburban-style shopping complexes in urban areas. By applying the term “obsolete” to a downtown that did not fit the ideal aesthetic for modern shopping centers, redevelopers rendered districts powerless and eligible for federally funded destruction.42

Recognizing the power of this label, Logue and Taylor published a report “proving” that the area was obsolete. The report listed the following: first, an engineering study concluding that more than 50 percent of the buildings were substandard; second, that the area was, as they defined it, underdeveloped; third, that the new Connector would place insurmountable demands on the antiquated street system; and fourth, that the development of the southern portion of the project area into a commercial park without the simultaneous transformation of the central business district would displace the Green from the center of the city and diffuse the CBD, further disintegrating the retail industry.43 The URA ceded to the Redevelopment Agency’s efforts to include the four-block area and approved the project in May of 1957.

Lee and the Redevelopment staff openly marketed the Church Street Project as commercial. They published promotional material to generate support and excitement over New Haven’s new downtown.

42 Isenberg, 193.
One such publication sold the Project and New Haven as “New England’s Newest City.”\(^{44}\) In a similar vein, when Lee announced the $85 million, 96-acre, Church Street project in the spring of 1957, he called it, “the most important thing that will ever happen in New Haven’s history.”\(^{45}\) Lee and the Redevelopment Agency’s efforts marketing the Church Street Project turned out to be worthwhile as the 1957 mayoral gave Lee an mandate to carry out these plans. Lee won the election by a landslide, earning an unprecedented 65 percent of the vote.\(^{46}\)

With the initiation of the Church Street Project, the Redevelopment Agency abandoned the idealistic urban renewal objective of providing decent, hygienic housing for every citizen. The sole focus of the Project was the potential commercial gain to be had by surgically installing new industry in select locations. The dilapidated marketplace and scattered residential buildings being cleared by the Redevelopment Agency would not be replaced with new “decent housing,” as the spirit of the 1949 Act would suggest. Instead, Lee and his staff hoped a 19-acre commercial park would rise from the dust.

**Part IV. The Original Church Street South**

The South Central “wedge” that extended from the new Connector to Union Station was the future site of the Church Street South housing project within the larger Church Street Project. Before the land was cleared, the worn-down, wholesale marketplace inhabited the majority of this wedge. Aspirations to clear the market existed as early as Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Cass Gilbert’s 1910 Civic Improvement Plan. When Gilbert and Olmsted produced the 1910 plan they assumed most of New Haven’s visitors would arrive by train and disembark at Union Station. They wrote, “The first impression of most visitors to the city will be gained on emerging from the station; this impression may be followed by others, but the first impression is a lasting one, and upon it will be largely based the opinion of the city

\(^{44}\) New Haven Pamphlet, April 1963, Series I: Mayoral Files, Richard C. Lee Papers, Group 318, Box 60, Folder 1183: Correspondence: Redevelopment – Church Street, 1963, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.

\(^{45}\) Powledge, 38.

\(^{46}\) Wolfinger, 182.
as formed by its visitors." Thus, the marketplace sitting directly across from Union Station concerned Gilbert and Olmsted, as it would be the first sight of visitors emerging from Union Station. Accordingly, they planned to build a grandiose boulevard through the market, connecting the railroad station to New Haven’s central business district and to Yale University (fig. 4).

Three decades later, the marketplace still stood, although it had aged considerably. When a young Dick Lee served as alderman, he requested to be assigned to the then-ineffective City Plan Commission. At the time, the City Plan Commission had only the decades-old city plan, drafted by Gilbert and Olmsted in 1910, and no money to hire a new staff. When Lee joined the Commission he established the City Plan Department and saw to it that they hire Maurice Rotival, the French Planner and Yale faculty member, to draft a new set of comprehensive plans for New Haven. New Haven, like many cities, went through a wartime planning process. Planning took on a new role in this period, entering new domains of society: academia, design, advertising, psychology, family planning, and sociology. There was a growing belief that planning was a social responsibility. Big business, bruised by the Great Depression, joined architects and planners in rushing to fill an architectural vacuum left by the War.

In his 1941 plan, Rotival recognized the permanency of the automobile and New Haven’s inadequacy in accommodating it. The city’s roads were too narrow to host the increasing number of cars in the postwar era and caused great congestion, furthering New Haven’s decay. Rotival viewed New Haven as a traffic center and argued that any chance New Haven had of eliminating blight and reversing dilapidation would need to stem from accepting the automobile, and its accompanying infrastructure, as imperative to the city’s economy. For Rotival, the Green was the city’s center of gravity. Once a vital

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47 Lewis, 208.
50 Shanken, 11.
component of the city, New Haven’s deterioration had caused a gradual northward trend of the important elements away from the Green, threatening to create a new center of gravity, thus abandoning the old center in what Rotival called, “a kind of schizophrenia.”

When Lee entered office in 1954, New Haven was one of a handful of cities to have a comprehensive plan, thanks to Rotival’s efforts. However, with no realistic course of action or financing capabilities, Rotival’s work had been thrown aside and forgotten. In 1951 Rotival was rehired to work with planning director Norris Andrews and traffic expert Lloyd Reid to renew his earlier plans. In 1953 Rotival, Norris and Reid published the “Short Approach Plan.” The Short Approach Plan called for the removal of tenements and the construction of a six-lane connector to funnel cars from the new Turnpike into the downtown area. The Plan also delineated nine renewal study areas, or neighborhoods that required a significant improvement in the physical plant (fig. 5). Of these nine neighborhoods, the Redevelopment Agency judged the Oak Street neighborhood to be the most destitute. Rotival and the Redevelopment Agency quickly took action to push the renewal program, and the Oak Street Connector, through to construction. Church Street, another of the nine renewal study areas, would be the next neighborhood to receive attention. Rotival planned an extension of Church Street through the wholesale market that would connect the railroad station to New Haven’s retail core, effectively echoing Gilbert and Olmsted’s boulevard.

In a letter from Rotival to Mayor Lee in January of 1955, Rotival lyrically articulated his grandiose aspirations for the Church Street Extension and argued for its development:

Among the many dramatic effects of the Connector will be to alter radically the orientation of the City. Extended Church Street will become beyond question New Haven’s “Fifth Avenue” – the main thoroughfare along which the commercial and business life of the city will be arranged. The area in which we have been concentrating so much of our time, and which presently is depressed, will become one of the most valuable sections of the city. To the east of extended Church Street, in keeping with the high use value which it will have as a result of the Connector, we have been planning a large retail shopping center with a huge parking complex, a bus terminal, and a hotel, all in various re-arrangements. …it is of vital importance to the city, faced as it is with the

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52 Ibid.
54 Lewis, 211.
necessity of extending Church Street, to encourage land use which will realize tax benefits more than justifying the cost of construction.\textsuperscript{55}

Rotival’s letter to Lee indicated the original commercial aspirations of the Church Street South land. While it is impossible to know the extent to which Rotival’s conceptions swayed Lee, his vision of the Church Street Extension as a “Fifth Avenue” or commercial force for the city, along with the potential tax benefits, are demonstrated in the initial Church Street Project. Prior to the decision to construct housing in the Church Street Project on the Church Street South site, the original plans for the area were for commercial development. Both Gilbert and Olmsted’s 1910 plan and Rotival’s 1941 plan envisioned the area transforming into a commercial thoroughfare connecting the business district with the railroad station, inspiring the plans for the Church Street Extension and commercial park.

The original Church Street Redevelopment and Renewal Plan designated the Church Street South land to be a commercial park, zoned as “CBD Supporting Commercial.”\textsuperscript{56} This purposefully ambiguous title was defined later in the plan in equally vague terms to mean any of the following: storage, non-nuisance industries, wholesale distributive market for durable or nondurable goods, retail, office, amusement, transportation or institutional.\textsuperscript{57} Essentially, the plan zoned the land for anything but housing. Defending this ambiguity, the Redevelopment Agency explained: “To create flexibility in concept, design, layout and location there are no specific restrictions on distribution and intensity of uses.”\textsuperscript{58} They continued, citing the Rotival plan: “Appropriate land uses in the Project Area were determined in a 1943 report by the City Plan Commission. Specifically, it was proposed that the area to the east of the Church Street Extension become a major wholesale and distributive center. The new

\textsuperscript{55} Letter from Maurice Rotival to Richard Lee and Carl Freese, January 17, 1955, Series I: Mayoral Files, Richard C. Lee Papers, Group 318, Box 4, Folder 105; Correspondence: CAC – Market, 1955, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 14.
highway access afforded by the Oak Street Connector and the extension of Church Street, in addition to the excellent rail facilities located immediately to the South makes this area most suitable for this use.”

Despite these assurances, there were few, if any, concrete plans for the commercial park. A brochure answering frequently asked questions about the Church Street Project published by the Redevelopment Agency in 1960 declared that a $4 million Medical-Dental Center was to be developed, but no such development ever materialized. It is possible that the city felt the land was too valuable to be used for public housing purposes, and it was not until negotiations with developers failed to progress that housing was considered as an option for the site.

Furthermore, the area was barely mentioned in municipal documents. The lack of attention given to the Church Street South site in the early stages of the Church Street Project, along with the perpetual ambiguity of development plans, exhibits the Redevelopment Agency’s strong desire to clear the area that had been branded a slum. Indeed, the Church Street Redevelopment and Renewal Plan read, “The Workable Program has, as its desired end result, the elimination of slums and blight from the City.” Ed Logue confirmed this sentiment in a 1959 memo to Dick Lee: “I’d really like to take all the land and clear it, and I suspect you would too.”

Only nine months earlier, however, Logue had written an article for The New York Times heralding the benefits of comprehensive planning and urban renewal over the newly demonized theory of slum clearance. Despite his condemnation, Logue and Lee openly accepted the slum clearance doctrine, as represented by their clearance of the Church Street South territory without any concrete development plans in sight. Furthermore, they did so in the face of citizen opposition. With the area being largely

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59 Ibid, 32.
60 Riding Up Church Street: Questions and Answers Concerning New Haven’s Redevelopment Program, 1960, Series I: Mayoral Files, Richard C. Lee Papers, Group 318, Box 36, Folder 789: Correspondence: Redevelopment – Church Street, 1960, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
62 New Haven Redevelopment Agency, Redevelopment and Renewal Plan for the Church Street Project Area, 32.
63 Memorandum from Ed Logue to Dick Lee, June 4, 1959, Series I: Mayoral Files, Richard C. Lee Papers, Group 318, Box 27, Folder 607: Correspondence: Redevelopment – Church Street, 1959, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
commercial, the majority of complaints against the original Church Street Project were commercial in nature. Merchants in the existing project area raised concerns over spikes in rent and the city’s refusal to guarantee them retail space in the newly developed land. The majority of leases contained an eminent domain clause protecting the landlords but not the retailers themselves from eminent domain, meaning that in the implementation of the Church Street Project the merchants would not be entitled to anything in return for their stores. A group of about 150 merchants formed, naming themselves the Central Civic Association, and organized a base of opposition for the hearing to express their discontent. One man lamented, “the redevelopment plan is going to have the same effect as a total fire, except that we have no way of recovering our loss or replacing our store,” and another citizen remarked, “you will find that you have scattered the better business enterprises now doing business on the west side of Church Street, and they will never return.”\textsuperscript{65} Despite these concerns as well as three lengthy lawsuits, the Redevelopment Agency continued the Church Street Project without altering the plan.

As New Haven evolved, so too did the Church Street Project. The original project was altered by a number of revisions to the plan. Each amendment required the consent of hired developers and two additional public hearings to inform the public of their decision and hear concerns. It was not until the Eighth Amendment to the Church Street Redevelopment and Renewal Project, in 1965, that the Church Street South site was declared to be a housing development (fig. 6). Where the Church Street booklet previously described the area’s designation as a commercial park now stood the following explanation:

Appropriate land uses in the Project Area were determined in a 1943 report by the City Plan Commission. Specifically, it was proposed that the area to the east of the Church Street Extension become a major wholesale and distributive center. In its Land Use Plan adopted in 1964, however, the City Plan Commission found as an objective the need to continue building new housing on the western and southern edges of the business district. Because of the changing nature of the two major areas immediately adjacent to the Church Street South area, the development of a wholesale and distributive center is no longer a valid or desirable use for this area. The area, which is residential, and the CBD, and the addition of housing in the Church Street South are would support the residential environ of the neighboring Hill region and put additional purchasing power within

\textsuperscript{65} Public Hearing, July 24, 1957, Series XVIII: Projects, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 392: Projects Planning and Plan Amendments, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
walking distance of the CBD. Thus, the original objective of preserving and anchoring the CBD would be realized.\textsuperscript{66}

Lee justified the drastic change in land use by arguing that a housing development would bolster New Haven’s retail core by providing a critical mass to the business district. Even more telling of this defense was Mayor Lee’s speech to the Citizen Action Commission introducing the Eighth Amendment and the Church Street South project: “Since 1956 we have studied dozens of possible uses for the former market area – industrial park, automotive center, medical research complex and state technical institute, among others. The residential plan I have just described to you was selected because of its great visual and economic influence on downtown, its high tax return, its dense, efficient use of the site and its broadening of our housing supply. In short, these plans offer the greatest overall benefit to the city…it will provide housing for where there is a heavy demand, attracting to the city families who might otherwise live in the suburbs.”\textsuperscript{67}

Lee hoped the new housing development would bring grandiosity and prestige to his city. In his statement at the public hearing he declared: “Church Street South…will create a gateway to our city unparalleled in beauty, splendor and architectural excellence. The talents of two of the world’s most prominent architects will be displayed on both sides of the Oak Street Connector, providing one of the most beautiful skylines of any modern city,”\textsuperscript{68} referring to Kevin Roche’s Knights of Columbus building. By this point, public hearings were a well-oiled publicity machine with every last detail planned by the Redevelopment Agency. Not surprisingly, the project met no opposition and was endorsed by numerous community groups, including the Chamber of Commerce, the Jewish Community Council, the Hill

\textsuperscript{66} Marked-Up Copy of Plan: Final Plan typed from this copy, May 27, 1964, Series XVIII: Projects, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 394: Planning and Plan Amendments, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.


\textsuperscript{68} Public Hearing – NHRA Church Street Redevelopment and Renewal Project, Amendment No. 8, December 29, 1965, Series XVIII: Projects, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 395: Planning and Plan Amendments, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven, 6.
Community Council, and the Washington Avenue Businessmen’s Association. While the Redevelopment Agency repeatedly emphasized Church Street South’s prestige and economic benefits, the concept of improving the city’s housing stock or the supply of additional housing was never mentioned. This contrast is largely reflective of the initial intentions of the Church Street South housing project. Mayor Lee and the Redevelopment Agency officers anticipated that the development would create a “virtually captive market” by providing “over 900 families within walking distance of the downtown retail area,” bringing, “great new purchasing power into the area.” Underlying these statements was the Redevelopment Agency’s belief that the incoming population should be above a certain income-level if it was to support the newly constructed downtown oasis. The term “commercial slum” had developed to describe urban retail cores that fed solely off of low-income residents. The remainder of the Church Street Project had calculatingly constructed a new retail district designed to claim suburban shoppers to avoid this very pitfall. Thus, the concept of the retail district’s critical mass being entirely low-income could not have been favorable to the Redevelopment Agency.

The celebrated housing project was to be designed by the world-renowned architect, Mies van der Rohe. The plan consisted of a series of long, low-rise buildings juxtaposed with slender high-rise towers, all related in the nature of their design and separated by vast, open green spaces (fig. 7). The original program, determined by Mies in conjunction with the Redevelopment Agency listed 700 – 850 housing units broken down as follows: 200 – 250 units for elderly housing, 150 units of moderate-income co-op housing, 50 units of public family housing and 300 – 400 units of middle- to upper-income housing. The moderate- and low-income housing required the lowest densities, reflecting the fear of creating new slums. Mies’ scheme also included a nine-room K – 4 public school and a Boy’s Club building at the advisement of the Redevelopment Agency. An amendment to the Housing Act dictated that any

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69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Isenberg, 190-191.
72 Preliminary Architectural Program, Church Street South, December 20, 1965, Series VII: Contracts and Agreements, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 104: R-2 Church Street, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
improvement to educational institutions in or near a project could be credited to the local project agencies as non-cash credits, counting towards a city’s one-third share of project costs. The amendment thus incentivized cities to improve their schools by providing a double return investment: the intrinsic value of the new facility and the federal dollars it earns. New Haven took advantage of this clause by constructing twelve new schools in or near project areas, replacing the many run-down, dilapidated schools causing agitation. Additionally, Mies’ plans temporarily included a new railroad station across from the project area, a detail known only to a few key members of the Redevelopment Agency. Mies’ luxury, tower-in-the-park housing complex was never built, however. Instead, Church Street South evolved into a low-income housing complex that was as different in purpose as it was in design from Mies’ original plans.

Part V. The Church Street South Housing Project

It is unclear what exactly accounted for the shift in the housing program from a luxury development, aimed to buttress the downtown market, to a low-income project, striving to improve New Haven’s housing stock. One can speculate, however, that the change in program for Church Street South was largely due to a collision of two rising public tensions during the 1960s. First, the Civil Rights Movement was generating momentum across the nation and had gained a foothold in New Haven through racist housing practices. Second, the growing national dispute surrounding urban renewal regarding the clearance of low-income housing units without a comparable amount of construction angered low-income citizens. Fred Powledge, in his work on New Haven during urban renewal, Model City, explained that the collision of these tensions during the 1960s resulted in a disdain for New Haven’s monuments to progress. “Such a physical manifestation of ‘progress’ as the Oak Street Connector and the Chapel Street Mall, and, later, the Knights of Columbus building, provided daily visual evidence to the black and the

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73 Wolfinger, 145.
74 Talbot, 156.
75 Memorandum from Joel Cogen to Richard Lee, September 21, 1965, Series I: Mayoral Files, Richard C. Lee Papers, Group 318, Box 75, Folder 1402: Redevelopment – Church Street (South) 1965, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
poor that the city could be changed, just as talk of a ‘slumless city’ and the glories of citizen participation made some of the citizens hunger after the realities behind the words.”

In the years leading up to the announcement of Church Street South, there was a growing consensus that City Hall had completely abandoned its commitment to New Haven’s low-income citizens. The bulldozers and perpetual empty lots served as visual evidence of the widespread demolition of low-income communities, a daily reminder of the removal of low-income housing, and therefore, residents. Yet, there was no comparable reminder of the construction of low-income housing, no counterpart to generate optimism or hope for a better future. This controversy had sparked an enormous debate in the national arena, one that eventually contributed to the federal urban renewal program’s budget cuts. Disagreement and confusion persists, however, over the number of low-income housing units that had actually been constructed in New Haven prior to the introduction of Church Street South. This was due to a couple factors. First, Dick Lee attempted to blend public housing into the existing neighborhoods, reluctant to construct concentrated high-rises, as had previously been exhibited in Chicago, or clusters of pronounced public-housing complexes, as in New York. Second, the growing body of writing about racist demolition and relocation practices flooded public opinion and altered views on New Haven’s housing agenda.

Lee opposed the idea of creating large, high-density, low-income housing projects. Instead, he devoted himself to creating “scattered” low-income housing throughout the city, which he hoped to continue in Church Street South. The Redevelopment Agency utilized two main methods to implement a scattered housing program. First, was the federally-subsidized 221(d)(3) housing, named after the section, paragraph and line in the Housing Act from which it originates. The program provided 100 percent FHA loans for moderate-income family cooperatives. The FHA insured loans had a forty-year mortgage with a set interest rate of three percent, well below the market rate. The reduced financing costs allowed for much lower costs to the tenants, resulting in lower rental prices. Second, Lee and the

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76 Powledge, 320.
77 Talbot, 141.
Redevelopment Agency developed “Rent Certificate” housing, also known as “turnkey housing.” In this program the city would lease conventional private housing and then sublease the units to low-income families for 23 percent of their income, the same rate as public housing.\(^78\) New Haven had initially exhibited this housing strategy in a pilot program in 1962 and it was later adopted federally due to its innovation and potential. The scattering of low-income housing, however, was nowhere near expansive enough to restore housing to all of the low-income residents, whose homes were acquired for urban renewal projects. This left Mayor Lee with the decision between the lesser of two evils: either construct a large-scale, low-income housing complex dangerously similar to failed models in Chicago and New York, or rely on the insufficient scattering strategies to provide adequate low-income housing. In other words, Dick Lee was stuck between a rock and modern architecture’s hard place.

When Lee first took office in 1954, he inherited 2,200 units of conventional public housing from previous administrations.\(^79\) Lee separated his housing program into three divisions: housing for the elderly, housing for the low- and moderate-income persons with steady income, and housing for the welfare poor.\(^80\) The grouping of two categories of housing as “low- and moderate-income” into a single division generated enormous confusion in counting units. Not only did the title fail to distinguish between low-income and moderate-income housing, it failed to distinguish between private and public developments as well as constructions and subsidies. A New Haven Redevelopment Agency Summary Report, listing government assisted housing completed as of March 1969, lists 1,805 low-income family (meaning non-elderly) public housing units and 503 low-income private housing units.\(^81\) Unsurprisingly, this was by far the highest reported number in comparison to non-governmental reports of low-income housing.\(^82\)

\(^{78}\) Wolfinger, 196.
\(^{79}\) Ibid, 196.
\(^{80}\) Powledge, 70.
These statistics become inconsequential, however, in comparison to the number of demolitions and relocations that occurred. After approximately the same period, by the year 1969, 6,300 housing units had been destroyed, meaning 7,000 households and more than 25,000 New Haven citizens, were forced from their homes. Furthermore, since the Redevelopment Agency aimed their programs at eliminating blight, it is likely that the majority of these 6,300 housing units had been branded blighted, meaning they housed low-income residents. Lee and the Redevelopment Agency failed to give adequate effort or attention to the relocation of citizens displaced by the renewal projects. They utilized the federal and state programs as a tool to renew their city rather than to provide decent housing to New Haven’s lowest income citizens. The focus of the Lee Administration’s renewal program should have been predominantly on the rehousing of the city’s citizens, as the spirit of urban renewal intends. Instead, the bulk of their efforts went towards the construction of a fantasy city to exist at some unidentified point in the future, while they fulfilled the bare minimum federal standards of relocating citizens. Furthermore, the demolitions disproportionately affected African-American and Puerto Rican citizens: while 85 percent of the New Haven population was white, white families only inhabited 55 percent of the 6,300 households.

After being forcibly removed from their homes, the displaced families needed to move elsewhere. This brought new racial concerns. Many African-American families reported that they could not obtain housing in certain parts of the city, that they had been refused bank mortgages, that they had been misled by real estate brokers, and that they were paying higher rates for housing than whites. As a result, many African-Americans were often forced into public housing because it was all that was available to them. In part because of the housing policy, African Americans communities quickly devolved into overcrowded, blighted areas. Alvin Mermin, the head of New Haven’s Family Relocation Office, confirmed this sentiment, testifying that, “In the process of relocating thousands of families in the city of New Haven, I have encountered many instances of gross inhumanity and insult to the dignity and rights

83 Wolfinger, 196.
84 Ibid, 196.
85 Talbot, 184.
of the Negro people.” Indeed, in a memo from Mermin to Dick Lee, Mermin wrote, “The financial ability of these families to pay for decent housing in the open market is not the only problem – there is also the fact that landlord’s don’t want them, at any price.” Attaching Mermin’s memo to his own, a Redevelopment Agency member told Mayor Lee that that the “point to stress at this [upcoming] meeting is that the Housing Authority should want to take responsibility for these large families.” In the process, this Redevelopment Agency member revealed the Agency’s aversion and neglect of the relocation process.

Numerous indicators signaled the growing opposition to discrimination in housing practices in New Haven in the years leading up to the announcement of the Church Street South housing project. In a letter from the New Haven CORE Chapter President, Blychen Jackson to Dick Lee, Jackson reiterated the problem to Mayor Lee: “One of the very real and pressing problems in the Negro community of New Haven is that of securing adequate housing. Over and above the normal economic difficulties of persons with limited resources, there exists the disgrace of denying the right to have it, because of racial identification, which we label discrimination.” Another letter, sent anonymously to the “The Mayors of New England,” was representative of this growing consensus:

Mayor Lee and other city officials tell you what great things they’ve done for New Haven. But there is another side to the same story. Here are some of the things that the poor people of New Haven said about some of the conditions in this ‘dream city.’"

Would you like come and live in one of the ‘slumless’ dwellings of Mayor Lee’s city?
-The Hill Neighborhood Union

87 Memorandum from Al Mermin to Richard Lee, January 12, 1961, Series I: Mayoral Files, Richard C. Lee Papers, Group 318, Box 43, Folder 908: Correspondence: Housing, 1961, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
88 Memorandum from Barry to Richard Lee, January 16, 1961, Series I: Mayoral Files, Richard C. Lee Papers, Group 318, Box 43, Folder 908: Correspondence: Housing, 1961, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
Men, women and children are demoralized and embittered by having to call ‘home’ a building whose sidewalks are strewn with garbage, whose hallways are dingy, decrepit and ill-lighted, whose basements are filthy and filled with stench, whose apartments are dirty, decaying and over-run with roaches. Many families have been temporarily relocated in one condemned building after another, the city failing to maintain any of the buildings in decent condition. Yet New Haven claims that it has no serious relocation problems.


There is more to New Haven than the beautiful buildings downtown. Ask the mayor to show you the Hill, Dixwell Avenue, Newhallville, and the projects. You may have to ask for directions. He might not know that they are there.  

While the authors clearly didn’t realize Mayor Lee’s Newhallville origins, the letter goes a long way in expressing a growing frustration with the discriminatory housing practices existing in New Haven. The reference to the “beautiful buildings downtown,” in particular, reveals a discontent with the Church Street Project and City Hall’s choice to prioritize commercial gain over improving the inequities in housing conditions. The letter echoes what Mermin wrote in his account, Relocating Families: The New Haven Experience, that “what most Negro families we dealt with really wanted was free choice.”

Housing was just one manifestation of the advancing racial tensions in New Haven. As early as June of 1961 the Redevelopment Agency was designing an anti-poverty program, to be supported by the Ford Foundation. In April of 1962, the Ford Foundation awarded New Haven $2.5 million to pilot their program, which became known as “human renewal.” With the Ford grant, the Redevelopment Agency was able to initiate Community Progress, Inc., the city’s effort to expand neighborhood organization and provide individual advisement to residents. One of Lee’s former administrators succinctly related New Haven’s urban renewal and human renewal efforts when he said, “Utilizing bulldozers didn’t solve the problems. In fact it just uncovered them.” Lee later remarked, “We knew we had to develop a human

91 Mermin, 98.
92 Talbot, 260.
93 Powledge, 46.
renewal program which was as broad and as comprehensive as our urban renewal program”. In 1962 he delivered a speech expanding on this:

It does not take a city planner’s education or a blackboard of statistics to show that our cities are in trouble. It can become quite apparent to any concerned citizen who would but take an afternoon’s walk through his own city. At first glance, he will certainly see the... facades of our contemporary office buildings, the concrete ribbons of our interstate highways and the glitter and excitement of Main Street. But let him look closer, in the shadows, down the side streets... he will see another and even more serious dimension to the urban crisis. He will see it in most city neighborhoods, on the stops of the tenements, on the garbage strewn streets and alleys, and on the faces of the men, the women and the children who during their entire lives have known nothing but despair. He will see, in effect, that the haphazard growth of our cities and the years of neglected and lack of comprehensive planning have resulted not only in physical ugliness, chaos, and decay; they have also produced the terrible by-product of human waste and suffering.

In 1963, Lee organized a Human Rights Committee to explore discriminatory practices towards minority groups in New Haven and to recommend solutions. The Committee suggested a Fair Housing Practices Ordinance due to the “many families economically and socially ready to buy houses and unable to do so because of color.” The Committee’s recommendation for a strong local anti-discrimination ordinance was passed in May of 1964. New Haven’s anti-poverty program was progressive for the time period, so much so that in an interaction with President Kennedy in 1962, the President joked, “You’re missing all the fun in Washington, Dick. You should have run for the Senate back in ’58 when you had your chance.” Lee quipped back, “You and your damn hindsight advice. Where would you be if I hadn’t stayed here and written your blueprint for the New Frontier?”

The mounting racial tension in New Haven finally crossed a threshold on Saturday, August 19, 1967, when a white merchant in the Hill neighborhood shot at a Puerto Rican boy and sparked a race riot, adding New Haven to the long list of cities that experienced riots during the summer of 1967. For five nights Lee was forced to keep the city in a state of emergency as the looting, arson, and chaos continued. It should not come as a surprise that New Haven had a riot of its own that summer. An article in The New

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94 Ibid, 46.
95 Ibid, 46-7.
97 Asbell, 7.
York Times, reflecting on the riot, remarked, “In the years before the riots of 1967, the dream of New Haven already begun to unravel. There was a mounting sense that Mayor Lee, previously hailed as the savior of the city, had been well-meaning but perhaps a little high-handed.”

Despite this unraveling, many hoped that New Haven, which had led the nation’s anti-poverty efforts and was “the pinnacle of enlightened, constructive effort to reach the heart of urban discontent,” would not fall into violence.

Mayor Lee, however, refused to acknowledge the racial aspect of the riot, announcing that the incidents, “were not racially motivated; they are wanton acts of violence and disregard for the law” and that there were “no outside influences involved in the ferment; what happened here is part of urban America, 1967. It can happen regardless of the city or state, anywhere in the nation.”

A confidential review of the arrested participants in the riot reinforced this interpretation. City analysts concluded that “this was an outpouring of the dispossessed and the frustrated, by inner city standards, people who are significantly below the level of aspiration of even the average inner city resident…These are not teenagers, who have yet to discover whether or not they will fail in adult society, they are men who tried already and have given up hope of success…As such, it may be said that these disturbances…are not a show put on by teenagers for ‘kicks’, neither are they a rebellion against the system and everything pertaining to it.”

What the analysts failed to consider was that the riot was a symptom of public discontent with the city, a protest against the bulldozers, and an announcement of citizens’ desire to be present in the eyes of City Hall. Analysts refused to admit that perhaps these “hopeless adults” were hopeless because New Haven had already failed them, and perhaps the city was indeed coming together in an effort to rebel against the system that had endorsed the destruction of their homes and removal of their families.

While racist practices expanded into all aspects of life, housing served as the crux of this cycle. Charles Abrams, housing expert and the creator of the New York Housing Authority, viewed housing as

99 Asbell, 7.
100 Powledge, 110-111.
101 New Haven Disturbance Arrest Study (CONFIDENTIAL), September 20, 1967, Series II: Subject Files, Richard C. Lee Papers, Group 318, Box 114, Folder 2032: Riots, Racial Matters, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
fundamental to the African-American plight. In his essay, The Housing Problem and the Negro, Abrams writes, “Access of the Negro to decent housing is becoming the vortex around which his other rights revolve. Without housing in areas of his choice, the right of his child to an unsegregated school is meaningless; his right to a job will be impaired; his right to move and to secure shelter in a decent neighborhood will be an empty shell.”102 Abrams’ conviction represents the shift in national discourse surrounding issues of housing and urban renewal. By the late 1960s, hopes for a better future accompanying urban renewal had been dashed by experience and the trope of the “slumless city” had been recognized as impossible. The public shift in sentiment prompted Mayor Lee to write, in a letter to the Board of Aldermen in 1968, “The provision of housing for low- and moderate-income families is the number one development priority of my administration.”103

The Church Street South housing project came to life in the spring of 1965, amidst rising housing concerns and racial tensions. While the change in land use from commercial to residential was telling of the shifting public opinion, the switch from luxury to low-income housing was arguably more representative of this evolution. By 1965 Mayor Lee and the Redevelopment Agency were almost certainly aware of the amplifying cry for additional low-income housing. The original program, which did not meet the needs of New Haven’s low-income citizens, contributed to New Haven’s burgeoning social and racial protests of the sixties. Powledge beautifully captures this spirit of discontent well when he writes:

Undoubtedly some of those who were radicalized in New Haven, as elsewhere, were motivated at least in part by a sadistic urge to see their city in trouble. Fourteen years of good publicity, more than a decade of reading about your model city in newspapers and magazines—and knowing that the description was far from accurate—has a tendency to create resentment in the best of people. Relocation was an ‘opportunity,’ it was said, but…citizens knew it wasn’t. They knew about the highways and shops that had been built where people once lived. They lived with the knowledge that the low-income housing that was being built was not for black or other ordinarily poor people, but for the elderly.104

102 Abrams, 72.
103 Letter from Mayor Lee to the Honorable Board of Aldermen, March 1, 1968, Series XVIII: Projects, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 334: Housing, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
104 Powledge, 178-9.
A series of program alterations gradually began to take place, transforming the original program of the Church Street South housing development. First, the city lost the grandeur of architect Mies van der Rohe in March of 1968, only seven month’s after New Haven’s riot. Officially, Mies’ stepped down after the Redevelopment Agency decided to cut the K-4 school from the program. Mies wrote Mayor Lee lamenting, “Now that the decision to not build the school has been made we cannot justify a continuation of our participation in this project.”  

More realistically, the Redevelopment Agency surprised Mies with the new low-income agenda for Church Street South, and the partnership dissolved from there. The recently appointed Yale School of Art and Architecture Dean, Charles Moore of Moore-Tunbull became Mies replacement.

When Moore was brought onto the project, in early 1967, the program had already evolved markedly. The plan was now comprised of three separate housing elements: a 221(d)(3) housing complex, a public housing facility for the elderly, and an additional tower of private housing for the elderly. Lee’s public rhetoric regarding the project had similarly transformed. Instead of citing the architecture and prestige of the project, Lee declared Church Street South, “the most significant housing development in our City,” continuing on to praise, “the largest mortgage ever issued in the state of Connecticut for low- and moderate-income families.”

Advanced financing plans existed for both the 22-story, 217-unit housing for the elderly tower sponsored by the Jewish Community Council and a 221(d)(3) co-op housing complex, to be sponsored by the New Haven Jaycees. Sponsors received the FHA loans allowed by 221(d)(3) housing and then hired a contractor to build the housing. Sponsorship, however, should not be confused to mean that these organizations held any decision-making powers; design decisions were entirely the responsibility of the Redevelopment Agency and Charles Moore. The earlier program that had included 300-400 units of

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106 Statement of Mayor Richard Lee, August 12, 1967, Series XV: Office of Public Information, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 263: Church Street, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.

107 Talbot, 141.
middle- and upper-income housing had transformed entirely. Between the FHA’s dislike of Dick Lee’s idea of vertical integration (a mixed-income building) for the project, and the now deafening cry for low-income housing, the program had evolved to include 301 low-rise units for low-moderate Section 221(d)(3) housing. The remaining 99 units were scheduled to be for middle-income families. The final 99 units were meant to maintain Lee’s idea of vertically integrated housing and reflected his aversion of constructing a housing complex that was exclusively low- and moderate-income units. Most investors, however, began to realize that “token amenity changes” would not induce middle-income families to pay $100 more monthly for what would be essentially the same housing. Thus, the program for the last 99 units was adjusted to be additional low- and moderate-income co-op housing. The decision ultimately proved inconsequential, however, when the funding for the final 99 units was cut in a large sweep of federal urban renewal budget cuts.

The end product was quite distinct from the approved design; in fact, it took Moore 32 site plans and agency reviews to compose a plan that satisfied everyone. In his first site plan, Moore had planned a road leading from the railroad station to the Connector, reminiscent of Gilbert and Olmsted’s European-inspired boulevard, with buildings on both sides, featuring shops and stores on the ground floor with apartments above. The FHA, however, was uncomfortable with the idea of apartments above and rejected the Ponte Vecchio-style site plan. As in many urban renewal projects, this extended process was largely due to financing restrictions. The complex, as built, is comprised of a series of low-rise buildings, organized along a central axis (fig. 8). The dwelling units are comprised of two basic types: a three-story high building consisting two- and three-bedroom duplexes placed atop of a three-bedroom apartment; and a four-story building containing the same duplexes atop a two-, four-, or five-bedroom apartment (fig. 9). This duo-faceted monotony arose as a necessity due to budgetary limitations and permitted only a

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108 “Low-Moderate Baroque”, 74-82.
109 Ibid, 74-82.
110 Lewis, 212.
111 “Low-Moderate Baroque”, 74-82.
112 Lewis, 212.
113 Ibid, 212.
few exceptions. Likewise, parking garages were compromised in one half of the housing units, resulting in surface parking lots, one of them being located directly across from Union Station. Since the project was located in the city’s fire district, precast concrete panels were chosen as the main medium. The contractor failed to work with Moore during the design process, as was required, and as a result the developer had to change the precast panels to concrete block in order to reduce costs by $800,000 and stay within FHA maximums.114

While architecture critics have grouped Moore’s design into a large collection of urban renewal housing failures, these condemnations typically ignore the care Moore put into his design. Convinced that the project needed to offer five-bedroom apartments, given the desperate need for housing of large families, Moore found a loophole in FHA maximums which would not allot additional money for a fifth bedroom, by designating the fifth bedroom as an “other habitable room.”115 Furthermore, Moore devoted much effort to ensuring that the residents could identify with one fragment of the overall housing complex. Moore’s detailed plans included small paintings above entrances and pavement contrasts as well as the naming of courtyards and residences to encourage resident ownership over smaller spaces within the larger complex. To ensure the titles for courtyards and residences would help to generate ownership, Moore went through a process of allocating names. He drafted a list of physical addresses, each with its own name. If, within a couple weeks, the designers in his office couldn’t remember either the name or the location, the site plan was changed.116 At times, however, city authorities would step in and demand changes, as was the case when the “X” was removed from “Malcolm Court.” (fig. 10)117 Though there are valid complaints regarding the design of Church Street South, Moore’s thoughtfulness and care to avoid creating an “impersonal home” for the future inhabitants of the project distinguished his design from many low-income housing projects across the nation.

114 “Low-Moderate Baroque,” 74-82.
115 Ibid, 74-82.
116 Lewis, 213.
117 Ibid, 213.
Part VI. Conclusion

Since its completion, the Church Street South housing complex has generated a considerable amount of criticism and hostility. Mayor Lee helped to engender this antagonism when he commented that the housing complex resembled army barracks more so than housing.\textsuperscript{118} Despite the many attacks on the Church Street South design, Moore’s low-rise, village-style design was a reaction to the Corbusian “tower in the park” high-rise philosophy that preceded his architectural generation. The infamous failures of impersonal high-rise urban renewal towers had urged Moore to create an environment of ownership and community within Church Street South. The result, though an inadequate design in many respects, speaks to the difficulty in creating desirable low-income housing within the urban renewal financing limitations.

The story of Church Street South allows insight into the national transformation of urban renewal. The larger Church Street Project, within which lay the worn-out wholesale marketplace, confirms the most prominent complaint of urban renewal: that politicians rapidly manipulated the legislation in order to address a multitude of municipal challenges: traffic, a shrinking tax base, joblessness, retail declines and decaying infrastructure. The Church Street Project abandoned the initial intention of urban renewal to provide decent housing for every citizen in order to address New Haven’s commercial decline, particularly the diminishing tax base and receding retail sales. The original plans and actions in the Church Street Project are largely reflective of an initial era of urban renewal that called for large-scale projects with complete clearance and rebuilding. The thought behind slum clearance and early urban renewal was that if the city could give its problematic, criminal, and impoverished citizens a better home, the space itself would help to reform those individuals into model citizens. Similar to many early urban renewal projects across the country, the Church Street Project cleared homes and businesses alike without any plans to provide improved housing or any guarantees that the retailers could return to their locations.

Church Street South was, at its core, a return to the original spirit of urban renewal. The sixties brought a climate of change and revolt to the United States, as evidenced by the arrival of movements

\textsuperscript{118} “Low-Moderate Baroque,” 74-82.
such as the New Left, black power, and women’s liberation. In New Haven, this spirit confronted urban renewal through two mediums: the Civil Rights Movement and the low-income housing crisis. The collision of the two conflicts amplified the public voice in New Haven, demanding attention from City Hall. In this instance, urban renewal in New Haven shed its preordained doctrine in order to listen to citizen concerns, revealing a more flexible, reactive political machine. This is not to say that Dick Lee and the Redevelopment Agency transformed urban renewal into an ultimately prosperous political era. Lee and the Redevelopment Agency constructed many housing units during Lee’s mayoralty, and Church Street South provided only 301 low-income units against the thousands that had been destroyed. The burgeoning public dissatisfaction with City Hall in New Haven communicated the hopelessness, the discrimination, and the inequities that still existed amongst the city’s citizens. The Redevelopment Agency’s announcement of the low-income Church Street South housing development, however, was an understanding of the slum as a condition that is fundamental to many of society’s deepest ills and not as a blighted area that can be cleared and cured. This realization lay at the core of New Haven’s ability to return to the original intentions of urban renewal in Church Street South.
Image 1\textsuperscript{119}:
The “blighted” area in the four-block stretch north of the Connector that was added to the South Central Project Area.

Image 2\textsuperscript{120}:
The “blighted” area in the four-block stretch north of the Connector that was added to the South Central Project Area.


\textsuperscript{120} South Central Renewal Area: Preliminary Project Report, September 4, 1956, Series XVIII: Projects, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 392: Projects Planning and Plan Amendments, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
Image 3\textsuperscript{121}:
A booster publication, released by the New Haven Redevelopment Agency, naming New Haven “New England’s Newest City,” featuring the Church Street Renewal on the cover.

Image 4\textsuperscript{122}:
Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Cass Gilbert’ 1910 Plan calling for the replacement of the market place with the construction of a grand boulevard, connecting the train station and New Haven’s retail district.

\textsuperscript{121} Church Street Project Promotional Material, Series XVIII: Projects, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 396: Planning and Plan Amendments, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.

\textsuperscript{122} Low-Moderate Baroque.” *Progressive Architecture*, May 1972, Series XV: Office of Public Information, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 263: Church Street, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.
Image 5\textsuperscript{123}:
New Haven’s nine renewal areas: One is able to see the Church Street Project Area, previously the South Central Project Area, with the addition of the four block area north of the connector.

\textsuperscript{123} "New Haven Redevelopment Agency Nine Renewal Areas Map, Series XV: Office of Public Information, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 263: Church Street, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven."
The Church Street Project proposed land use, after the decision to build the Church Street South housing development. The Church Street South land is bounded by Union Avenue, the Oak Street Connector, and Church Street South; Blocks H, I, J, K, and L.

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Image 7:
Mies van der Rohe’s scheme for the Church Street South land; a mixture of low- and high-rise buildings interspersed with open spaces.

Image 8:\footnote{126}{Low-Moderate Baroque,” *Progressive Architecture*. May 1972, Series XV: Office of Public Information, New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Group 1814, Box 263: Church Street, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.}

Charles Moore’s scheme for the Church Street South housing project.
Image 9:\textsuperscript{127}
Church Street South, as built today.

Image 10:\textsuperscript{128}
Malcolm Courtyard in Church Street South.

\textsuperscript{127} Church Street South, New Haven, Connecticut. Personal photograph by author. April 12, 2012.
\textsuperscript{128} Church Street South: Malcolm Courtyard, New Haven, Connecticut. Personal photograph by author. April 12, 2012.
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