

Redevelopment disaster

It all looked so promising in January 1972, when the Willimantic Redevelopment Agency and planning consultants Raymond, Parish and Pine published the Willimantic Urban Design Report. This 22-page pamphlet painted an attractive picture of how the city would look once the bulldozers, architects, planners and builders had completed their tasks. There was no doubt about it. The old Thread City was looking a little frayed around the edges, and needed an injection of life and funds. Unfortunately, a post-war planning mindset still dominated those given the task of reshaping Willimantic for the 21st century.

The agency was a six-member panel. Led by Betty Lou Williams, the executive director, they included Baron Bray, John Wrana, Milton Kozelka, Joe Tubridy and Richard Anthony. The group stated that its purpose was to revitalize Willimantic's business community by establishing a total environment that blended existing and new developments into a "harmoniously functioning area."

The agency's design report immediately condemned many of the city's most historic structures, particularly those built in the years following the Civil War, which were located on Temple, Center, Broad, and Union streets. These buildings were described as "obsolete and deteriorating," but among their number were architectural gems that now only survive in photographs. They were eliminated, but existing, sound structures would be rehabilitated and be included alongside new commercial, residential and office buildings.

Main Street would form the "spine" of the 35-acre project and the deteriorating buildings would be replaced with new stores, open plazas, street furniture and attractive landscaping to enhance the shopping environment, and provide attractive resting places to attract pedestrians downtown.

The project envisioned no major changes in its land use patterns, but redeveloped areas would have off street parking facilities, shopping plazas and a courthouse. No tall buildings were proposed, except for an 8-

story apartment house planned for the location today occupied by the Father Honan housing complex. A 6-acre shopping area would complement the existing business district between Church and Broad streets.



Tom
Beardsley

The most dramatic changes were planned for the area bounded by Church, Main, Broad and Valley streets. Every structure here was slated for demolition and replaced by an extensive paved area. However, it was important, the planners argued, that the parking lots here be landscaped with ample trees and shrubs. The plot located between Broad Street and the old railroad line heading to Boston, was "sorely neglected and inadequate." This sector, including the historic Irish-American working class section centered at Jackson Place, would be razed and replaced with 160 housing units. The next problem to be addressed by the developers was the city's poor traffic flow.

Main Street was, in effect, a major highway, and traffic snarl-ups were common. It was therefore proposed to widen Jackson, Main and Broad streets, and remove Temple and Center streets, Jackson Place, and a portion of Union street, in order to introduce an effective one-way traffic system.

Overall, the plan ignored the city's rich history, and the chance to adapt its 19th century buildings, and spatiality to modern-day needs. However, one concession to history was made. The importance of the Jillson House was noted. This 1820s structure would be restored, and great care was taken "in choosing the landscaping and building materials of areas and structures adjacent to this historic building."

Looking back 30 years, the plan was an unmitigated disaster. But in those days it was impossible to think outside of the box. This was the period of bulldozers, and boring, uninspired architectural design. In effect, redevelopment did nothing, and the city has long suffered its consequences.

It was hoped redevelopment would relieve traffic, as shown here in 1971.



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