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The “Sly” Racism of Redevelopment in Middletown, Connecticut

by

Brien H. Bradley
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Introduction

In two articles published on November 19th, 2015 and March 20th, 2016, staff writers for the *Middletown Press* detail Mayor Dan Drew’s public statements regarding the Wharfsie Commons housing complex on Ferry Street in Middletown, Connecticut.¹ The 96-unit apartment complex was opened in 2007 by a private developer contracted by the city government, one of a few initiatives ostensibly designed to provide much needed “affordable” housing in the East Main neighborhood and the North End generally. Although these projects were proposed by their architects to be a progressive and constructive intervention made on behalf of the inhabitants of the North End, they were part of a long history of redevelopment in the downtown that had consistently targeted poor Black neighborhoods. In earlier decades redevelopment projects had completely transformed the residential neighborhoods of the South End of Main Street and dispersed their residents, displacements that acutely affected the Black community there. Although the public life of this legacy for the most part ran only subtly through the conversations that led to the construction of Wharfsie Commons, the connection was undeniable. In both cases the push for redevelopment by the city government had revolved around the identified need to support the commercial security of Main Street, by transforming areas that were openly categorized as the proverbial “bad part of town.” This categorization was once mapped specifically onto the Black sections of the South End neighborhood in the 1950s, and several decades following the catastrophic
transformation of its counterpart at the other end of Main Street, the residents of the North End had been made to bear the weight of this categorization’s symbolic content and institutional consequences.

Mayor Drew’s statements in the articles perform the rhetorical work that is constantly necessary to enact this categorization. He represents the complex as “dilapidated,” and theorizes a direct causal relationship between this physical condition and the social conditions of the complex, which are represented as marked by violent criminality—conditions which he said not only threatened the physical welfare of those law-abiding residents of Wharfside Commons, but also the economic welfare of the city as a whole, in that “it [was] not fair to the taxpayers of Middletown to deploy with disproportionate number of officers to the area on a regular basis.” What is left out of this analysis is an explanation of why, only a few years after the demolition of a neighborhood that had also been represented as “dilapidated,” the apartment complex put in its place had been allowed to succumb to a similar fate. Although he harshly criticized the owners of the complex, a massive development corporation out of Greenwich called the Richman Group, for not taking good care of the property, he made no explanation of how this had apparently been allowed to happen so quickly, unbeknownst to city officials until 2015, eight years after the “revitalization” of the neighborhood.

The way that Drew perceived the complex is summarized by an image he provided for the first article in the series, one of two images that head the article in its online format, neither of which portray any people. Drew’s image is entirely occupied

by a large container dumpster, overfull with mattresses and garbage bags, with a few broken garbage bags scattered on the ground around it. It suggests that the issues at hand could be summarized as a failure on the part of the property owners or managers to address the buildup of garbage (fig. 1.1).²

![Figure 1.1. All Waste. Photograph by Dan Drew, Fall, 2015.](image)

The second image is an out of focus, off kilter photo from across the street from Wharfside Commons, apparently captured by someone sitting inside of a car. Although two people are within the frame, they are so distant from and clearly not looked for by the viewer that they can hardly be found in the image. Meanwhile, the specific perspective represented here is clarified by the images accompanying the next article in the series: Mayor Drew and a group of at least eight other White city officials speak at a podium erected at the Wharfside Commons playground, pictured speaking into an NBC microphone in order to “[ask] for help from Wharfside

Commons residents in identifying those who commit violent acts” in order to “combat heightened violence in the North End neighborhood” (fig. 1.2).³

Figure 1.2: Press Conference. Photograph by Sam Norton, March, 2016.

The dialogue held in the article and at the press conference becomes more complicated, especially in regard to the difference in ascribed social value between the figures of the “criminal,” the law-abiding “resident,” and the “taxpayers of Middletown,” when we consider the contradiction that was at the heart of the construction of Wharfside Commons. Beginning in 2005 a highly subsidized demolition project removed houses represented as “blighted” in order to replace them with an also highly subsidized “modern” apartment complex, which was meant to increase the amount of middle-upper income rental housing in the area. As a result of political resistance to neighborhood clearance from the North End Action Team

(NEAT), the city framed the project as one designed to increase the amount of “affordable” housing available for “working families.” Yet once built, rents were too high for the former residents of the neighborhood to live there, and city officials as well as the Richman Group pushed to keep the complex off-limits to Section 8 tenants. In statements made by these officials, Section 8 tenants were explicitly excluded from the category of “working families,” imagined to literally not even want, let alone deserve, “a safe place to live.” The figure of the “Section 8 tenant” would continually operate parallel to the figure of the “criminal” and the “jobless,” in the terms of a discourse that projected onto people with low or no-income a symbolic devaluation of their humanity; in the words of one North End resident and activist, “lowlife” status. Ultimately the complex would be forced to accept Section 8, but even so remained too expensive for the poorest people, many of whom had been relocated from the neighborhood, and who were therefore in the greatest need of housing opportunities.

Wharfside Commons therefore occupied a paradoxical position: as a high-rise subsidized housing development on a street that had for years been approached by city officials and the rest of White and middle class Middletown as the “bad part of town,” the site remained representationally overdetermined by stigma projected from outside. Yet city planners also saw the site as holding great potential for increasing the Aggregate Income Density (AIG) of the downtown area, in order to bolster the economic profile of Main Street and attract investment. Indeed, their efforts had ensured that most of the former residents would not be able to return to their

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4 Claire Griffin, “Alley is a Dead End, and Home,” Hartford Courant, October 2, 2005. Emphasis Added.
neighborhood. In this context, how was it that these city officials were induced to see only dilapidation and no actual people in this place, and what is accomplished by the sole representation of this perspective? They were all there apparently there in the first place out of concern for the “law-abiding/working-families” of Wharfside Commons, going so far as to stage a press conference on-site, primarily in order to enroll residents in the identification of “criminals,” but also in order to make a statement in defense of the entitlement of tenants to a physically sound living environment. Forces outside their own conscious understanding must have therefore shaped these officials’ view of reality.

It was around the implicitly Black figure of the criminal/non-jobholder, invoked here and discursively addressed as expendable, that the city officials’ entire perspective on the neighborhood cohered. First, the unexplained (and unexplainable) relationship between this figure’s represented deviance and the represented general “dilapidation” of the complex was the veil that obscured the years of institutional neglect that would be required for a newly constructed apartment complex to fall into disrepair. Therefore, neither city officials nor the authors of the Press articles would interview or address the perspectives of a single resident of the apartments relative to their views on this “dilapidation” and how it may have affected their daily lives; when included at all, they would only be asked to speak about criminal incidents. Meanwhile, this figure’s represented deviance also served as the counterpoint to the “working families” that city planners wished to attract to the complex (i.e. the “right kind of poor people,” or, lower-middle income). In their name, the police would work with the Richman Group to install 24-hour security cameras and a tall metal fence encircling the entire complex, both of which would help to facilitate the execution of
SWAT raids on the building, while also inaugurating a long-term hunt to evict so-called “problem tenants.” It was also surely the threat imagined to reside in this figure that compelled the individual who took the photograph of the complex in the first article to do so from within the apparent safety of their vehicle, and therefore produce an image that was made so hastily and at such a distance that the people within its frame are practically imperceptible. Finally, in spite of the fact that the second article identified the need to fight violent crime “in order to make Ferry Street a safer place for families to live and raise their children,” the expendability of the figure of the implicitly Black criminal/non-jobholder was the ground of possibility for the negation of the entire neighborhood as a part of the city proper, within the terms of its rhetorically, and thereby institutionally, produced status as the “bad part of town.”

This is made clear by the contradictory statement by Drew that it was “unfair to the taxpayers of Middletown” to deploy so many police officers to the area so regularly. Were these residents not taxpayers, as such entitled to every effort of life saving and property protection to be offered by the services of the Middletown Police Department?

The broader proposal is that it is precisely by virtue of the forms of categorical knowledge that underwrite such performative exercises as this press conference, as these pivot upon the exclusive representation of the point of view of Whites in positions of institutional privilege/status and their subsequent hegemony over the terms in which reality is to be normally interpreted, that the general social structure of the city is generated, including the distribution of resources in various forms. The task of this thesis will be to identify and historically situate the systemic mechanisms of
this generative process, within a detailed examination of the various phases of redevelopment that have taken place in Middletown since the 1950s.

A number of Wesleyan undergraduates have written theses and research papers about redevelopment in downtown Middletown over this time period, and all of their works inform my own. These include a variety of approaches, from investigative political history to ethnography and archival theory. Claudia Center’s “Urban Renewal and Citizens’ Groups in Middletown, Connecticut” (1987) and Karen Horwitz’s “The Evolution of Middletown’s Urban Renewal” (1997) narrate redevelopment with a focus on the particular political struggles and structural mechanisms by which it has historically had a negative and often violent impact upon racially and economically marginalized groups living in neighborhoods slated for redevelopment. Louisa McFadden Winchell’s “Redevelopment Remains: Encounters with Middletown’s City-As-Archive” (2018) also reinforces some of this work, but is more specifically concerned with theorizing an archival engagement. Although Winchell’s way of constructing arguments about the redevelopment process itself is not unlike my own in that she considers the production of social meanings to be a central force shaping the realization of the built form of the city, my approach has a more direct focus on the history of the interplay of various forms of knowledge, as these are understood to produce the material organization of the city vis-à-vis their production of a social reality and the terms in which it is to be interpreted. Stephanie Campbell O’Brien’s “Middle Class Middletown? Wesleyan University and the Reinvention of Urban Space” (2008) is the work I see as closest to my own, in that O’Brien is concerned with the politics and empirical consequences of classed ideology in the elaboration of Wesleyan’s institutional power, as this power was
exerted via the social meanings made to determine the course of a very particular downtown redevelopment project.

My arguments are in large part based on readings of primary sources drawn from a number of archives. The Middletown Redevelopment Agency, the Department of Planning, Conservation, and Development, and the various private groups that have been hired by or collaborated with the city over the course of redevelopment have produced numerous planning documents that I analyze to understand the logics operative in the worldview of city officials. Every decade or so since 1950 city agencies have published general plans for the development of Middletown as a whole, which offer revealing insights into the shifting ways that officials have oriented municipal policy around a particular vision of Main Street as a commercial center and symbolic heart of the city. Together with the plans produced for specific redevelopment projects, these documents allow for a close reading of the principles that have guided city planning and its claims to promote general well-being in the city.

These principles have since the beginning been articulated in economic terms, but have always also depended for their legitimacy as guiding principles on the dynamic interaction of various forms of categorical knowledge, most centrally those that ascribe differential degrees of social value based on the symbolic content projected by the constant categorization of different social groups in terms of race and class. This process must be unpacked, both in its explicit forms, such as the figure of the “Section 8 tenant” above, imagined by city planners and the heads of development
corporations to not “want a nice, safe home”\(^5\) and therefore whose ostensibly subpar desires are imagined to reflect an inherent “lowlife” category of human, and in its implicit forms (such as the fact that both this figure of the “Section 8 tenant” as well as the figure of “the jobless/criminal” are implicitly Black in the imaginary of the (ubiquitously White) city planners). On the one hand, I seek to interrogate the economic principles of city planning by proposing that the interplay of the forms of categorical knowledge described above has always been the foundation and point of departure for economically framed policies. On the other hand, I propose that these economic principles themselves constitute a general framework of understanding about the world, within which this interplay of social meanings and the empirical realities to which they lead cannot be normally seen having a direct relation. Instead economic principles see only economic problems, problems created by forces ostensibly outside the realm of human action, and which are therefore seen as essentially unsolvable, except in economic terms.

The archives of the *Middletown Press* and the *Hartford Courant* hold extensive records of the public dramas surrounding redevelopment and other issues, which allow me to approach the broader field of discourse with which city planning discourse has always interfaced directly. These archives often offer the opportunity to draw lines between implicit concepts in planning documents and their referents in the real world, particularly in cases where city planners hold more candid dialogue in the press than they might in formal documents. They also provide more general contextual information than could ever be found in planning documents.

One of the most important archives for my research has been an oral history collection held in the Middletown Room at Russell Library, collected by a group of Wesleyan students in the African-American Studies department under the leadership of the Black Women’s League of Middletown between 1976-1977. Twenty-seven different interviews were conducted with local elders, some of whom were born in Middletown, many of whom had moved to Middletown from the U.S. South or other areas, and they all had a long history with the city. The students who conducted these interviews wrote a series of essays meant to offer a picture of what life was like for Black people at various times in Middletown up to 1970, and these essays are available in Wesleyan’s libraries under the title of “Black Perspectives on Middletown.”6 The interviews themselves are only available at Russell Library, where they can be listened to on CDs or cassette tapes that have accompanying transcripts.

To my knowledge, these interviews have not been incorporated in the research of any of the other secondary scholarship published about redevelopment in Middletown, and in my view they are actually the most important available resource to understanding this history in its early stages. The project as a whole is an extremely important one, in part because it refutes the habitual erasure of Black experiences in a city that is dominated by monuments and narratives that ritually present a whitened version of Middletown history. More specifically, the interviews are invaluable because they provide the only way of understanding the earliest redevelopment

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projects outside the perspective of Whites in positions of institutional status/privilege, whether city planners or journalists for the Middletown Press. Most of the interviewees speak to the first redevelopment projects in the 1950s, which they understood as a direct effort by the city government to displace Blacks from the downtown area. Their perspectives present an empirical challenge to the claims of city planners to serve the “general welfare,” as well as a conceptual challenge to the economic principles that underwrote this vision of general well-being, and specifically the place the Blacks were meant to occupy at the bottom of this vision’s implicit hierarchy of socioeconomic value.

I have also conducted a series of interviews that inform my perspective on the trajectory of this history, particularly in the last three decades. The most important of these has been an interview with Cookie Quinones, a community leader and activist who has lived in the North End since the 1980s, and who was president of the community advocacy non-profit the North End Action Team (NEAT) during the redevelopment projects of the early 2000s. The insights gained in my interviews with Quinones are a foundational basis for my interpretation of the politics of these events, as well as my conceptual understanding of the social value ascriptions accomplished within contemporary political discourse in Middletown as it is dominated by economic categories and the White middle class point of view.

In my first chapter I analyze the worldview that led to three decades of redevelopment projects that continually displaced the Black residents in the neighborhoods at the South End of Main Street, focusing on the discourse of urban “blight.” At this time city planners were able to use “blight” designations to acquire the legal authority and state/federal subsidies necessary to demolish entire
neighborhoods to transform a large part of the downtown. These policies were understood to provide the only path to general economic prosperity in the city, to be achieved by running a highway between the downtown and the Connecticut River, and by making Main Street into a consumer shopping district with large parking areas, both of which required all out destruction of existing residential areas. Yet the nature of this economic logic revolved around perceptions of these neighborhoods that were specific to middle class Whites, outside of which it was completely unintelligible. The oral histories of the “Black Perspectives on Middletown” project expose the vast empirical distance between the “general welfare” secured by redevelopment and the actual well-being of all city residents. Most importantly, these interviews provide the necessary perspective from which the systematic workings of the exclusionary logic of “blight” discourse can become legible.

The second chapter is an analysis of the way that elaborate narrative practices were developed by city planners in the midst of political resistance from community groups in redevelopment areas, namely the South End Families Association (SEFA) and the Taxpayers Association, the former specific to the Black community and the latter specific to the White European immigrant communities and their political representatives. I argue that during this time, city planners rehistoricized the downtown (and Middletown around it) in a way that rhetorically produced a historical precedent suggesting that their vision of economic prosperity, to be achieved by clearing neighborhoods and converting Main Street into a middle class consumer commerce zone, was the only way of securing the redemptive prosperity. The race and class exclusivity of this vision as it was elaborated in the face of local resistance is highlighted by its reflex exclusion of poor Black and White European immigrant
histories in the downtown, within a narrative that implicitly valorized the centrality of the slave labor plantation economy of the 18th and 19th centuries to the economic history of Middletown.

The third chapter will provide a conceptual bridge between the history of South End redevelopment and that of the North End in the early 2000s. This is necessary because although the logics behind these two phases of redevelopment were much the same, a substantial shift of emphasis had taken place in the rhetorical justification for policies enacting displacement. Neighborhood clearance activities in the North End, particularly on Ferry Street, were positioned as a welfare initiative and arose in apparent response to local demands for an end to municipal neglect of the area. I argue that this shift in emphasis can only be understood within an understanding of the transformations in American and Middletown society brought on by the Civil Rights movements of the 50s and 60s.

The fourth chapter will elaborate this argument in a detailed examination of the redevelopment projects in the North End. The ostensibly “colorblind” terms of these projects have operated only on the basis of a constant projection of differing degrees of humanness in a discourse dominated by middle class Whites in positions of institutional status/privilege, inevitably leading to a repetition of the historical pattern inaugurated in the South End in the 1950s. This has taken place partly on the basis of a new narration of downtown history, one that now includes working class European-immigrant experiences, but continues to omit the long history of Black residency in the downtown area. But this development has played a supportive role to the now absolute role of economic principles in structuring municipal policies that habitually enact displacement, constricted opportunities, and political
disenfranchisement for the institutionally marginalized communities of the North End. The proposal is that within the terms of these economic principles and their facilitation of the continually projected devaluation of no/low-income status, neither the systemic nature of poverty as produced by the institutions of our society nor the profound human costs of this can be normatively seen as such. Therefore, nothing can change unless these economic principles and the categorical forms of social knowledge on which they depend are thoroughly disrupted.
Chapter 1: Unsettling the Discourse of “Blight”

In this chapter I examine city planners’ deployment of the concept of urban “blight” in the context of redevelopment projects that revolved around establishing Main Street in Middletown as a commercial zone to attract middle-class consumers, concurrent with the destruction of the working class neighborhoods and the relocation of their residents away from Main Street. I interrogate the discourse of “blight” in order to reveal the race and class specificity of the perspective from which this discourse was elaborated, along with the way in which the overrepresentation\textsuperscript{7} of this perspective as universal was reciprocally related to the collapse of its concepts into ostensibly objective economic logic. Although this economic vision of the “general welfare” and its deployment in “blight” designations presumed a White middle class subject, therefore excluding working class White European immigrant groups in the downtown, by far the more profound exclusion would be experienced by the Black population of the downtown area. This dynamic will serve as the point of departure for a discussion in which I seek to challenge the overrepresentation that was the prerequisite of this process by turning to Black perspectives on this history, and in particular the challenges made by Black activists to the empirical and conceptual basis of this overrepresentation.

Centralized planning for the redevelopment of the downtown began in the early 1950s and led to the formation of a redevelopment agency dedicated to this task.

\textsuperscript{7} Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” \textit{The New Centennial Review} 3, no. 3 (2003). This term is used by Wynter to reference the process by which a specific world view achieves hegemony over the terms in which reality is to be interpreted by veiling its own specificity as a worldview, instead making a claim to being an objective and universally applicable representation of reality.
in 1954. The planning documents of this agency tended to contextualize their projects within particular narrations of the ideal character of the city and its social and economic history. These documents, which were created to acquire funds and to set an agenda for the future of the entire city, served as a crucial conceptual lens through which public policy could be articulated both to the people of Middletown and to sources of funding. This archive is reflective of the historically fiscal and conceptual dependency of the city government on the narrative construction of racially-defined and class-inflected categories of belonging and not belonging to propel the often violent processes of residential redevelopment forward.

Karen Horowitz argues that the first wave of redevelopment planning in Middletown was part of a national response by city planners to the problems evident in city centers in the aftermath of suburbanization, in which “already existing spatial dichotomies between middle-class and working-class Americans, were greatly exacerbated.” In this framework, the concentration of poverty in the central city, its actual visibility, and its role in producing “categorization of the city as a place of uncontrollable poverty and crime” in the minds of “middle-class individuals” led to a redevelopment ideology that saw the eradication of deteriorated physical conditions (“blighted areas”) as a silver bullet for solving the problems of the central city. Horwitz’s characterization of the imperatives guiding “blight” designations as based on an economically framed need to eliminate objectively deteriorated physical

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8 Department of Planning, Conservation, and Development, Redevelopment in Middletown, Connecticut, 3.


conditions, made highly visible by exacerbated spatial dichotomies following the process of middle-class individuals moving out of the central city and into the suburbs, must be seriously qualified. This description accurately summarizes the perspective of city planners as they might describe it themselves, but it fails to account for the subjective dynamics of perception that were the entire basis for this view.

The process of suburbanization has also been colloquially represented as a phenomenon of “White flight,” in which the racism of middle-class Whites led them to move to the suburbs after the migration of large numbers of Blacks from the South to the central portions of American cities in the decades after World War II. Horwitz’s description of exacerbated spatial dichotomies leading to a higher “visibility” of poverty in the central city, described as generally classed dynamics, were in many cases driven from the start by racist modes of perception harbored by the White middle classes. The “blight” designations made by city planners in Middletown in the 1950s and the following decades were also the specific expression of White middle-class modes of perception that were categorically anti-Black and would rhetorically facilitate the dismantling of Black neighborhoods. I emphasize this status of “blight” discourse as engendered by a specific mode of perception because redevelopment policy was not simply the result of a profit oriented mentality that targeted Black neighborhoods, but rather a set of logical conclusions made from within a particular way of seeing, a particular world view, one with serious material consequences, but which also could not conceive of itself as a specific perspective. The idea that entire neighborhoods were objectively “blighted” served violent ends that depended upon the overrepresentation of this view as a universal one. This
required the constant repression of other perspectives that saw the neighborhood not as “blighted” but as a home and community.

The 1955 “General Plan for the City of Middletown” was published “with the general purpose of guiding and accomplishing… harmonious development of the city… [in order to] best promote health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity and general welfare.”\textsuperscript{11} This is a significant document because it is the first of many that would set out guiding principles for the city as a whole, which would be reevaluated roughly every ten years. Although principally concerned with reshaping the downtown area with an eye for “blight” removal, Middletown is characterized in the plan as having a defining rural quality, in contrast to the later plans’ ubiquitous characterization of the downtown area as the economic and symbolic heart of the city. Of the three principle guidelines proposed by the plan “as a means of helping to maintain Middletown as the rural city that it is,”\textsuperscript{12} two are of primary concern here: first, the downtown and its proximity to the Connecticut River and Route 9 is identified as a crucial economic asset to Middletown \textit{in general}, leading to the suggestion of “redevelopment of the East Side and the riverfront, to increase its tax revenues, to increase its commercial activities, and to advertise itself through a show window a mile long.” Second, the plan calls for “Greater control over residential development to the benefit of the City as a whole…. [to] avoid the fostering of tomorrow’s blighted areas and rural slums.”\textsuperscript{13} In relation to the framing of Middletown as a rural city, these guidelines rhetorically construct the downtown area

\textsuperscript{11} Commission on the City Plan, \textit{General Plan for the City of Middletown}, 1955, 1.

\textsuperscript{12} Commission, \textit{General Plan}, 1955, 10.

\textsuperscript{13} Commission, \textit{General Plan}, 1955, 10.
as a separate, visibly and objectively deviant zone requiring careful management but holding special possibilities as an economic support for the rest of Middletown if managed properly.

This extremely general plan formally organized the agenda of the entire city around a violent and disruptive process that completely transformed the residential areas surrounding the South End of Main Street, an effort led largely by progressive reform minded political leaders, many of whom were associated with Wesleyan University. In particular, State Highway Commissioner G. Albert Hill and Mayor of Middletown Stephen K. Bailey, long-time professors in the Chemistry and Government departments at Wesleyan, would be the first and most vocal proponents of redevelopment in the early 1950s, suggesting that it was essential for securing a generally prosperous future for the city. The first group of projects paved the way for state highway Route 9 with the construction of Acheson Drive, completed in 1951 and requiring large-scale neighborhood clearance. This was followed by the Court Place and Center Street Projects, which transformed the neighborhoods east of Main Street at Court and College Streets from residential areas into a government and commercial center, including the present day sites of the City Hall and the State of Connecticut Superior Court. The last stage would be the Metro South project, a vast undertaking from 1965-1984 between the city government, Wesleyan University, and Middlesex Hospital to redevelop a 125-acre area surrounding the South End of Main Street.

Each of these projects was able to use the designation of areas as “blighted” and the prospect of attracting regional commerce to mark working class residential neighborhoods for clearance and redevelopment, in the process acquiring federal and
state grants to do so. Although the South End and East Side neighborhoods were lived in by both White European migrant and Black U.S. South migrant communities, these disruptions and displacements were more intense and total for Black than White residents, both in immediate terms and in the longevity of their effects. Most important here is the fact that most Whites that were displaced were enabled to move to the suburbs because they owned their properties and were thus compensated for the loss of their homes, and if they were not homeowners it was generally possible to find rental housing elsewhere; meanwhile, the Black population of these areas consisted entirely of renters who typically received no compensation or relocation support, and who were often made homeless by redevelopment projects, particularly in the 1950s when very few White landlords would rent to Black tenants.14

Consequently the term “blight” cannot be disentangled from these racial injustices, nor can the larger redevelopment ideology that it served. Although “blight” removal was framed within an imperative to improve the city’s tax base and nourish the economic capacities of the downtown to maximize the prosperity of the city in general, it responded first to very specific perceptions that were ascribed to potential consumers who lived outside of the city, and these perceptions themselves were posited as the fundamental obstacle to the economic success of Middletown. In this way the neighborhood clearance agenda gained an urgent precedent that took the racist and classist perceptions of “middle-class individuals” (who, at least in the early 1950s, were ubiquitously White) as a universal position through which Middletown’s

future and the problems imagined to plague this future could be framed in ostensibly objective economic terms.

A crucial point here is that in formal documents city planners often placed a layer of distance between themselves and this pathological point of view, by externalizing these middle-class perceptions to regional consumers who might spend money in Middletown if the downtown area could be made attractive to them. Yet city planners themselves (all of whom were White, middle class, and held privileged status positions) perceived the downtown neighborhoods in this very particular way. An often cited quote by Mayor Bailey is representative of this tendency, in which he described the “concentration” of “urban pathology” east of Main Street that he could observe from his office window in City Hall, with his perception of undesirable smells and dysfunctional social behavior confirming his belief that these “slums were cancerous.” Thus this frame of view did not originate with the middle class consumers who might be attracted to downtown if it was cleansed of “blight,” nor of course to the poor Whites who lived in these “cancerous slums,” but more specifically and comprehensively to middle and upper class Whites who looked in on these neighborhoods from the outside. By externalizing these perceptions to potential consumers, city planners were able to convert a race and class specific way of seeing into a cluster of imperatives that would define the future of the city in the ostensibly neutral terms of consumer economics, while positing redevelopment of downtown neighborhoods as the only viable way of removing obstacles to the general fulfillment of this prosperous future.

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This framing served as the ground on which a reductively economic, consumer-oriented, and generally anti-Black vision of Middletown’s future would be built. All planning and redevelopment efforts would revolve around the central premise that drastic changes to the physical environment of the downtown were required to attract more consumers from the region (by turning East side neighborhoods represented as “slums” into a “show window” bordering Route 9), and that the economic benefits of these changes would be so universally positive that they would outweigh the impacts of displacement.

In contrast the empirical reality (as evidenced by the testimony of Black residents who experienced the upheavals of redevelopment) was that it constituted the planned destruction of the homes and disruption of the communities of Black people in the downtown area. Thus the vision of general improvement focused on the economics of regional consumerism actually cannot be imagined outside the mode of perception translated into policy by racialized “blight” discourse. The principles of economic growth and their legitimacy as principles that claimed to serve the best interest of all the people of Middletown were fundamentally structured in this context by the presumption that a specifically White middle-class mode of perception was not a subjective view but objective and universal fact. Reciprocally, the idea of economic objectivity in decision making itself actually served to obscure the fact that the goals and strategies of “blight” removal were engendered by a mode of perception that was race and class specific. For this reason, the decisions made by city planners are best understood not as veiled efforts to target Black neighborhoods, but rather as economically logical conclusions born of a frame of view defined by racism, one that imperatively enacted the exclusion of Blacks from a notion of the “general welfare,”
even if city planners themselves may have imagined that Black people would benefit from economic development.

In the mid-1970s the Black Women’s League of Middletown, in collaboration with the director of the Center for African-American Studies at Wesleyan and a number of involved students, conducted a series of interviews with the purpose of creating a historical archive of specifically Black perspectives on Middletown. The recordings and transcripts of these interviews are available in the Middletown Room of the Russell Library, and they offer detailed accounts of the city by Black people who had lived in or migrated to Middletown before 1950. These accounts provide perspectives on the neighborhoods in the downtown area and the upheavals of early redevelopment that offer a comprehensive picture of the social context of Middletown, one which is obscured by the discourse of city planning. In their descriptions of general discrimination against Black people in such areas as housing, employment, and political representation, as well as the divergent experiences of White and Black migrant communities that arrived in Middletown by similar circumstances, these accounts make it possible to situate redevelopment policies and their devastating effects as the logical result of the domination of a White middle-class point of view.

A number of those interviewed comment on the fact that Middletown companies in the 1920s directly sought Black laborers from Virginia and the Carolinas for large projects, and that the only housing and employment available to Blacks who migrated were directly associated with these companies. While the landlord of one three-story building at the east end of what was once Center Street rented primarily to Black tenants, the interviewees ubiquitously comment on the
general unwillingness of White property owners to rent or sell their properties to Blacks before World War II. Thus John Scovill mentions the Center Street building in his interview as an anomaly, in a town where otherwise Black people could for the most part only find housing in cramped company owned houses by the river below the railroad tracks near the southern portion of Main Street.\textsuperscript{16}

Many of the others interviewed had come to Middletown because they or their family members had been employed in the Tuttle Brick Yard off of Newfield Street, and a woman identified only as Mrs. Davis describes in her interview how although the owner of the yard provided the opportunity of homeownership for his recruited Black employees, this was done out of personal convenience, and was not reflective of the general ability of Blacks in Middletown to find housing: “there was a time that even if you had the money you couldn’t buy your house because they wouldn’t sell black people a place. Nobody wanted to sell to them. They didn’t want to rent to them.”\textsuperscript{17} These recollections were matched by those of several others, who described how the only places that Blacks could find housing were in one apartment building on Center Street, in the company and rooming house buildings by the river and south Main Street, or in the houses owned by the Tuttle Brick Company.\textsuperscript{18} Many recalled being shunned by White neighbors when they bought houses by the Tuttle Brick Yard, with Hattie Wright commenting on how when Black families began moving

\textsuperscript{16} Georgiana and John Scovill, interview in \textit{Black Perspectives on Middletown}, Black Women’s League of Middletown, May 1, 1976.

\textsuperscript{17} Mr. and Mrs. John Davis, interview by Valerie Hazelton, \textit{Black Perspectives on Middletown}, Black Women’s League of Middletown, February 25, 1976.

into houses in Newfield not only did many White property owners begin putting their houses up for sale, but a petition was circulated among the Whites to prevent Black settlement in the suburbs. Wright said “[t]hey had the idea that they were the masters! They wouldn’t speak to you. But I didn’t pay any attention because I knew they weren’t paying my house off.”

The Black population in Middletown increased significantly during and after World War II, and much of this growth took place in the South Main neighborhood as relatives and friends of those who had already gained a foothold followed in migrating north. Edward Jackson, the first Black police officer in Middletown, was interviewed for the oral history project and he stated that during the labor shortage of the war “opportunities opened up for black people in the various factory jobs” that had previously only been available to Whites, and there was a “great influx of black people.” This led to serious housing problems specifically within the Black community because although by this time it was possible to rent an apartment in more places than the building on Center Street, “[i]t was hard for a black person to get a loan here for to build a house or own a house […] when I came here I left a family of two, my wife and two kids […] and I worked up here for four years before I was able to send down and get them and have a place for them […] the first place that I got for my family was in the housing project at Long River Village.”

As more people migrated the number of Black tenants in the South End waterfront neighborhood grew, and the descriptions offered in the interviews of those

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19Hattie Wright, 1976.

who had lived there are indicative of the difficult circumstances facing a community that was marginalized. Bertha McRae lived on Union Street and described how the neighborhood was vulnerable to flooding due to its low location by the river, how in the 1940s the houses became crowded as apartments filled with relatives and friends, and how in the winter the buildings were “cold, cold, cold. You’d keep a stove, a black person never had a furnace.” Others described the prevalence of household pests and the futility of complaining to landlords about these issues. In spite of these hardships it is also clear that this became a close and established community, where much of the Black population had either directly migrated or were the children of parents who had directly migrated from a few specific areas of the Carolinas and Virginia, and many had known each other long before the move. Nonetheless, as a result of general discrimination by Whites of the property and business owning class (employers, lenders, landlords) they had been restricted to living in some of the oldest and most flood prone housing in the city, and they had no other options.

Almost every person interviewed made some mention of the dislocation of the community caused by the first redevelopment projects, and for some these were events on the scale of a natural disaster, described as more disruptive even than the most catastrophic floods of the 20s and 30s. It all started with the construction of Acheson Drive, a precursor to the state highway Route 9, which presently passes through Middletown between Main Street and the Connecticut River. The project was proposed by Albert Hill, a longtime chemistry professor at Wesleyan who had

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22 Annabelle Graham, 1976.
recently been appointed as the state highway commissioner, and who was related by marriage to a Middletown family that “had long dominated commercial interests along Main Street.” The formal goal of Acheson Drive was to “benefit the Main Street merchants who were clamoring for a new highway that would give [Middlesex] county shoppers easier access to their stores.” The route of the road was planned so as to pass directly through the contemporary neighborhood of the South End waterfront. The feeling among many in the effected Black community, who were evicted with little warning and no compensation financially or in terms of replacement housing, was that this project was essentially an effort to “literally do away with a great deal of black housing […] without any plan for relocation.”

In the aftermath of the redevelopment agency’s acquisition and clearance of properties in the spring of 1950, the displaced Black residents faced a crisis situation. The city government had not put together a relocation plan of any kind. Yet beyond this material injustice, the most ubiquitous recollection in the interviews is of the insult represented by city and state officials’ last minute decision to house the displaced in a series of tents in Hubbard park, in a “grassy area which was not much more than slop at that time of year” due to its low elevation by Sumner Brook. Not only did people refuse to move into the tents, they “tore the tents down. That’s what

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26 Willard McRae, 1976.

27 Willard McRae, 1976.
really happened. They didn’t want to stay there.”

Instead many displaced people found accommodations by moving in with relatives nearby who were outside the immediate redevelopment area such that in many cases “there’d be two families tied up in one house,” while others were taken in by their churches.

Although it seems that the destruction of the tents was done secretively overnight by a few individuals who are never named, intentionally so in at least one interview, it was followed by highly public political activity by Black community leaders. When the Democratic city administration refused requests for the opening of a housing project called Veteran’s Terrace to the displaced (which had been built to temporarily house veterans returning from the war but was unoccupied at the time of the “tent city”), Reverend William Davage of the Cross Street AME Zion Church successfully mustered the support of the Black electorate for Salvatore Cubeta, the republican opposition candidate in the 1950 Mayoral election, in order to secure this housing. He and his congregation were also able to purchase four properties on “William Street and William Place […] rental properties that would accommodate many of Middletown’s blacks who were in dire need of housing.” In spite of these and other efforts, the election of Wesleyan government professor and progressive “urban renewal” enthusiast Stephen K. Bailey as Mayor in 1952 saw the entrenchment of redevelopment policies that made further destruction of the East-Main neighborhood a centerpiece of municipal policy. Acheson Drive was only the

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29 Annabelle Graham, 1976.
30 Willard McRae, 1976; William and Sally Davage, interview by Lucinda Lane and Janet Franklin, Black Perspectives on Middletown, Black Women’s League of Middletown, March 2, April 5, and April 6, 1976.
31 William and Sally Davage, 1976.
beginning of a long-term redevelopment effort that completely transformed the entire residential area east of south Main Street, the next stage being the Court Place and Center Street projects in the late 50s and early 60s. An already dire “housing shortage” (itself the active creation of redevelopment disruptions combined with the longer historical context of general discrimination in housing and loan finance) for Black people would thus be deliberately exacerbated.

Prior to redevelopment Center Street had run east from Main Street between College and Court Streets, and it was a high-density residential area that for several decades was home to many working class Whites and Blacks. But as with the construction of Acheson Drive, by the time of the project “there were no white people left,” as White tenants did not face housing discrimination, while those who owned their homes received financial compensation that allowed them to purchase homes elsewhere. In the lead up to the Center Street and Court Place Projects the housing shortage specific to the Black community was exploited by many of the White property owners in the redevelopment area, who began renting out buildings that were already designated for acquisition and demolition by the redevelopment agency. This phase of neighborhood clearance ultimately dislocated 35 Black families. A final report from 1964 stated: “the most difficult problem that confronted the relocation office was the relocation of low income, minority […] families, but eventually, satisfactory quarters were found for them.” There can be little doubt that these families were housed only as a result of the organizational and activist efforts of


local leaders like Reverend Davage, because the redevelopment agency had initially expected in their “Relocation Plan” to provide relocation assistance to only “four non-white families.”

At this point it is important to return to the conceptual basis of the redevelopment program and the rhetoric of “blight” removal. Redevelopment policies had their origins in the progressive agenda associated with the Housing Act of 1949, with its paradoxical aims of securing the “general welfare and security of the Nation and the health and living standards of its people [...] sufficient to remedy the serious housing shortage” by means of “the elimination of substandard and other inadequate housing through the clearance of slums and blighted areas.” This paradox, where “slum clearance” was understood to be necessary to provide housing and improve living conditions for the poor, was definitive of the dominant political climate in Middletown. Between January and March of 1949 the Middletown Press published a handful of articles discussing plans for Acheson Drive and a new City Hall, activities requiring neighborhood clearance, meanwhile at least two front-page articles per week featured either the ongoing debates in the state legislature relative to the general low-income housing shortage or the more local debate about tightening income restrictions for tenants at the Middletown public housing complex Long River Village (which was almost entirely reserved for Whites at the time). But from the perspective of progressives like Mayor Bailey, the “slums” were as much of a


problem for the “general welfare” as was the lack of affordable housing. While this “problem” was most often formally described as an economic one, the “blighted” neighborhoods as an obstacle to the commercial health of a consumer-oriented vision of Main Street, the acquisition of federal and state grant money pivoted on the idea of “blight” as an objective threat to the well-being the very people whose homes were to be demolished. Whatever their longer term vision of “general [economic] welfare,” redevelopment advocates understood the clearance of neighborhoods as also part of the protection of working class people from “unsanitary” and “unsafe” living conditions.

This is not to say that city planners were not directly trying to displace poor Black people from the Main Street area—this was undoubtedly a fundamental goal of the Whites in positions of power. But in their benevolence planners believed they were simply aiding Black (as well as White European immigrant) residents on their way out of the “slums,” and in their willful ignorance they did not anticipate the extent to which the lack of relocation assistance and general anti-Black racism among the White property owners of Middletown would make it almost impossible for Blacks to find anywhere to live after being displaced. The Middletown Press published a series of articles in 1961 following the difficulties faced by Black families in their search for housing, and in one article Albert Hill (who by this time was the director of Middletown’s redevelopment agency) was consulted as a central authority on the issue. He identified the “Negro housing problem” as one of the most important challenges facing the city and threatened certain landlords with investigation by the Civil Rights Commission, saying they were “playing with fire” by not accepting Black tenants. Hill made these threats unironically only one month
after pushing in another article for the movement of the redevelopment program, the
most immediate cause of Black displacement, into a more advanced stage of action.38

In two of these articles a dialogue is held between Albert Hill and a White
reverend who was the head of the housing committee of the local NAACP branch, in
regard to their futile efforts to find white landlords willing to rent to displaced Black
families. Reverend Peery apparently did not see the issue as one of general anti-Black
racism in the White community, but rather of White landlords’ reluctance to rent to
Blacks “for fear of what his neighbor will say, or even do.”39 Recent incidents in the
suburban Westfield area of White residents who “held night meetings and made life
miserable for a Negro family that moved out their way,” and of a White man who was
“threatened with physical violence” when he directed a Black family that they might
find a home there, were invoked by the minister to validate this claim that the issue
was one of reasonable landlord fears of economic or other losses. This elaborate
explanation was designed to suggest that while certain individuals in the community
were racist, and thus landlords’ fears of damage to their interests were justified, it was
not a problem that could be understood as a general “symptom of intolerance and
discrimination.”40

This understanding of the workings of racism directly parallels the worldview
of the proponents of “blight” removal, where the growth of Main Street commerce
required the removal of the “eyesore” of the East Main neighborhood in order to

38 “Hill Sees Negro Housing Major Problem for City,” Middletown Press (Middletown, CT), February

39 “Landlords Turn Deaf Ear to Pleas for Negroes,” Middletown Press (Middletown, CT), February 16,
1961.

provide middle-class pedestrians with a comfortable and attractive shopping experience. In theory these policies would directly serve the “general welfare” and “prosperity” by promoting overall economic growth, a goal that could apparently only be achieved by shaping the downtown area around the subjective perceptions of White middle-class shoppers, as these were understood to dictate the laws of commercial circulation. Thus the conceptual framework underlying the policies that were causing such dramatic displacement in the first place were matched by Reverend Peery’s view that White landlords’ fears did not represent general racism in the community, but rather regrettable yet economically logical decisions not to rent to Black tenants, based on the idea that certain racist Whites in suburban areas would perceive their neighborhoods as less valuable and attractive if Blacks were allowed to live there.

In both cases there is a total resignation with respect to the fact that these “economic” logics were no more and no less than the inscription of the racist and classist worldviews that defined the White middle-class of Middletown into the formal terms of planning discourse, but in such a way that these worldviews could appear as natural forces, not as the specific and problematic perceptions of a particular race and class category. Thus “blight” removal itself was also understood as the protection of the poor from unsafe living conditions, an idea rooted in the specifically White and middle-class perception of poor (and especially Black) neighborhoods as “unsafe” and uninhabitable, in spite of the empirical reality that people did in fact inhabit these places, and did not want their homes to be destroyed. The very same structural racism that was responsible for most Blacks’ inability to live

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41 Dillon, “Redevelopment in Middletown,” 20
anywhere but in the oldest and most flood prone housing in the city was also the primary conceptual basis for redevelopment policy. The designation of an area as “blighted” was based on a set of criteria taken from the American Public Health Association, where the lack of such amenities as central heating, baths, and toilets rendered a structure uninhabitable and in need of demolition. Recall Bertha McRae’s statement that in the old waterfront neighborhood it was “cold, cold, cold,” the houses heated only by stoves because “a black person never had a furnace.” Indeed, in preparation for clearance of the Center Street area, the redevelopment agency “revealed that 74.9 percent of the homes were without central heat; 56.2 percent had no hot water; 27.4 percent had no private bath; and 12.3 percent had no toilets; and 35.2 percent showed serious structural deterioration.” These statistics were used to legitimate redevelopment as a policy concerned with alleviating material conditions of poverty. Yet when paired with Bertha McRae’s analysis of the material conditions of poverty as the product of structural racism, the use of these statistics to legitimate redevelopment policies reveals a profound paradox. In the view of the most affected poor Black subjects, redevelopment consisted of the violent displacement of Black people from their homes and the disruption of the social fabric of their neighborhoods, and any claim that these actions were made out of concern for their health and welfare would have appeared completely absurd. It therefore becomes quite clear that a racist and classed mode of perception that was fundamentally at odds with the lived experiences of the poor and specifically the Black poor was the primary conceptual basis not only for both redevelopment’s vision of “general

42 Bertha McRae, 1976.

43 Dillon, “Redevelopment in Middletown,” 39.
welfare” as embodied by Main Street commercial growth, but also its vision of neighborhood clearance as an anti-poverty program. It certainly was an anti-poverty program in that it was anti-poor and anti-Black, and in this context, the use of militaristic terminology to designated the “target areas” of redevelopment reflects an implicit hostility on the part of city planners to the very people whose best interest they claimed to serve.

The Middletown Press articles evidence an interesting disjuncture between local White leaders’ understandings of the “tent city” incident a decade prior and the perspectives offered of the incident by Black interviewees in the oral history project. The article states that as State Highway Commissioner, “[Director Hill] had to order the demolition of Negro housing” to make way for Acheson drive, and “[w]hen the community developed no solution for housing” director Hill was forced to intervene and ordered that tents be set up at Hubbard Park to house the displaced. In this recollection “the tents remained up only overnight, for they were destroyed by a mysterious group of whites the next day. To this day Hill does not know what became of the families, who did not even have tent shelter to go back to.”44 Another article goes so far as to recall how “in one tragic moment whites in the city hurled bricks down on the poor tents.”45

These accounts stand in stark contrast to those of the Black interviewees who actually experienced displacement. In their accounts the blame for Black displacement is directly attributed to White city officials (with director Hill often mentioned by name), not just “the community.” Meanwhile the “tent city” was seen


as not as a lifeline following displacement, but rather as an insult to Blacks’ humanity and standards of living. Every person interviewed seemed certain that the tents were destroyed by Blacks in protest. Many expressed a righteous conviction that this constituted a rebuttal to the dehumanizing treatment that they experienced at the hands of the city government and White society generally.

The Middletown Press articles indicate the extent to which Whites in positions of power were prepared to invent elaborate stories to verify their own perspective. The idea that racist Whites destroyed the tents doubly reinforced the worldview of redevelopment proponents. On the one hand, this version of events completely obscured the fact that Black people were directly targeted and displaced by a redevelopment policy described as universally beneficial, by verifying the idea that the tent city (and redevelopment itself) was a benevolent, concerned, and protective gesture. Meanwhile, if the tents were destroyed by racist Whites (who were presented as a rogue, fanatical, atypical, and specific group, in contrast to the empirical reality of generalized racism among Middletown’s White population), racism itself could continue to be understood as an isolated social phenomenon to be treated by selective legislation, and not as an organizing principle of the society—including the worldviews of city planners and the authors of these articles themselves.

From the Black perspectives, the tent city represented the injustices of a racist society and the dehumanizing social meanings projected onto Black neighborhoods by the discourse of “slum clearance” and “blight removal.” The destruction of these tents constituted a revolt against this White middle-class point of view, from which Black neighborhoods were categorized as deteriorated and antithetical to the health not only of Main Street commerce, the imagined well-spring of Middletown’s future
prosperity, but also to the health of the Black community itself. In contrast, Willard McRae would counterpose a categorization of the tents in Hubbard Park as “uninhabitable;” we might also include here such terms as substandard, unsafe, and unsanitary. The destruction of these tents can therefore be understood not only as a condemnation of and revolt against the material injustices of redevelopment policy, but also more fundamentally against the representational violence of the White middle-class view of Black neighborhoods as “substandard” and “blighted,” and therefore of the Black people who lived in these places as themselves inhabiting a substandard register of humanness—a view that was overrepresented in redevelopment policy, by way of the language of economics, as if it described empirical reality.

Nonetheless, the hegemony of the White middle-class perspective meant that in spite of “continued protests and expressions of dissatisfaction” from the politicized Black community, successive waves of redevelopment continued to displace Black residents through the 1960s and 70s under rhetoric that shifted strategically while remaining unchanged in its fundamental principles. The properties that Cross Street AME Zion Church had purchased on William Street to house displaced Blacks would be demolished to make way for “Huntington Store and Color Mart,” and many of the people interviewed in the Black Women’s League project were forced to move multiple times.46 Annabelle Graham lived at different times on Center Street, William Street, and Union Street, all of which were subjected to redevelopment. Anne Cooper was forced to move from a house on Water Street to Veteran’s Terrace, later moving to the (by this point fully integrated) housing complex at Long River Village, and she

recalled that of the three she “liked it better in the house.” John Scovill lamented the redevelopment of the South End saying “[d]own around Sumner Street there was a triangle there and that used to be full of houses. Water street, there was houses there. It’s all gone out now. There’s nothing there, nothing. It’s all bare ground and Main Street is the same way. What they’re tearing them down for and not building nothing back, I don’t know.” Hattie Wright recalled that over the course of South End redevelopment the Black community of the area was fundamentally destabilized, “split up, most of them; the majority split up. Everybody had to find some place to dwell.” These were the social and material consequences of the White middle-class “blight” perspective, overrepresented as though it represented empirical reality and inscribed in the ostensible objectivity of “economic” logics as they structured city planners’ imposed and innately exclusionary notion of “general welfare.”

The interviewees for “Black Perspectives on Middletown” were typically asked whether the racism of the South differed substantially from what they experienced in Middletown, and the responses to these questions were generally ambivalent. Willard McRae described how Blacks in the North faced a different kind of communal struggle. The large Black population of the South combined with formal segregation meant that Blacks had jobs and social positions of all kinds within their own communities: “we had black everything there as opposed to what existed in the North […] I think that my folks brought, you know, awareness and a sense of our

47 Anne Cooper, interview by Leta Pittman, Black Perspectives on Middletown, Black Women’s League of Middletown, March 25, 1976.


49 Hattie Wright, 1976.
heritage which we couldn’t see in Middletown because there were no models.”

For Hattie Wright the difference between racism in the North and the South was one of quality, not quantity: “You know, they’re the same everywhere. They are the same. No difference really; they’re just more sneaky up this way than they are other places.”

Unlike many of the others interviewed, whose migrations to the North were described primarily in terms of employment opportunities, Bertha McRae specifically moved because she did not want to live with the “discrimination there in the South.” She was immediately disappointed: “the Southern white people are brave with [their racism], the Northern people are just as bad but they are sly […] I’d rather you be a bold devil than to be a sly devil.” The domination enacted by the role of the White middle-class “blight” mode of perception in city planning discourse at this time is one representation of the mechanisms of this “sly” racism. And the structuring of the “general welfare” within the carefully framed principles of Main Street economic growth represents a rhetorical strategy by which city planners’ sly racism could be imagined not as a race or class specific way of thinking, but as a universal and objective view.

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50 Willard McRae, 1976.

51 Hattie Wright, 1976.

52 Bertha McRae, 1976.
Chapter 2: The Elaboration Period

In their interviews Willard McRae, Hattie Wright, James Moody, and Reverend Davage all identify the Acheson Drive project as a principal origin of Black political organization in Middletown, and redevelopment would remain a central point of contention for decades. During the Metro South projects from 1965-1984, The South End Family Association (SEFA) was formed to advocate for the interests of Black residents who had been displaced or were likely to be in the future. The organization confronted the city government during this time by demanding more information about and involvement in the decisions that were being made on important issues, such as the use of funds to demolish buildings as opposed to rehabilitation and reuse, as well as plans for building replacement housing and relocating displaced people. SEFA advocates also had to directly fight to ensure that Black tenants actually received what little financial compensation they were entitled to for their forced displacement, against city planners whom they accused of withholding these entitlements from Blacks specifically. The undergraduate research projects of Claudia Center and Louisa McFadden-Winchell have studied this struggle in depth, focusing on activists Idella Howelle and Reba Moses, and in my reading of their work two things are very clear: the work of the activist leaders of the SEFA made important material and representational gains and placed substantial pressure on the city government to at least claim to serve the interests of Black as well as White residents. Meanwhile, the city government and the redevelopment

agency did everything in their power to stifle these efforts and achieve redevelopment in line with the trajectory laid out in the early 1950s.

Over the course of these political struggles the way that city planners rhetorically constructed visions of the past and future of Middletown underwent significant changes. The works of Center, Horwitz, and McFadden Winchell are in agreement that these changes were most influenced during this time not by SEFA activists but by progressive advocates, many of whom were associated with Wesleyan, who wished to invest redevelopment with a sensitivity to the historical architecture of the downtown. In some ways these arguments for the preservation of historical structures had goals that paralleled those of SEFA activists, namely a desire to prioritize the rehabilitation and reuse of buildings, as opposed to outright demolition and clearance of entire neighborhoods. Yet the preservationists put forward a very particular historical vision, one that was entirely commensurate with the raced and classed terms in which city planners already defined the future of the downtown. This historical vision, while initially invoked in protest of demolition projects, ultimately provided city planners with an expanded field of discourse through which to elaborate and legitimate redevelopment. It should be considered as part of city officials’ oppositional response to the demands made by the Black community.

With this in mind, Karen Horwitz’s identification of an “evolution period” in city planning, in which shaping of downtowns was vested with a new significance and a sensitivity to history prompting more comprehensive and detailed management than simply demolishing “substandard” structures and relocating their inhabitants, might be reframed as an “elaboration period.” This was a time in which the serious
threats to the legitimacy and fundamental principles of redevelopment ideology posed by Black activists (among others) required city planners not only to demonstrate community inclusion in decision making, but also to more elaborately frame their policies, in order to cement them as the only imaginable route to a prosperous future.

The need for a more elaborate conceptual and historical justification for redevelopment was met in large part by the retelling of Middletown history in the planning documents surrounding the first stages of the Metro South project. This retelling would be taken further and combined with a misleading claim to “community inclusion” by the fusion of historical preservationist principles to the economically framed imperatives of a White middle class vision of Main Street commercial health. This fusion allowed planners to situate the shaping of the downtown through redevelopment within a deeper historical legacy, one that was carefully constructed so as to privilege the existing vision.

In contrast to the 1955 general plan’s characterization of Middletown as a “rural city,” the 1965 general plan declares that Middletown “is and always has been a crossroads town”, which was once “the largest community in Connecticut” due to its “importance as a trading and manufacturing center” for the “traffic” on the Connecticut River. Its future success is linked to this symbolic legacy via the state expressway system, specifically Route 9 east of Main Street (the building of which depended on the earlier clearance and relocation activities that made way for Acheson Drive). This transport corridor, if matched by proper planning, would promote the growth of Middletown as a “metropolitan center” for “neighboring towns of the [Connecticut River] Valley” and support the “[e]xpansion of [Wesleyan University’s] expansion of [Wesleyan University’s]

many activities,” which “will bring more people to Middletown and consequently create a demand for more commercial services.” To fulfill this vision, the plan proposed to remake the downtown, as the newly designated Central Business District (CBD), around two kinds of ideal movement: vehicular circulation “from all parts of the City and surrounding region,” and “pedestrian” circulation around retail and administrative facilities. Unlike the 1955 general plan no direct mention is made of the intent to remove entire neighborhoods, but the imperative remains implicitly. Growth of the CBD is presented as possible only because of earlier urban renewal, which provided the opportunity to “give Middletown a thoroughly modern shopping center of regional importance” in areas that were once residential. The intent to continue neighborhood clearance activities is clearly indicated by statements like “the character of [the neighborhoods adjacent to Main Street] is likely to undergo a considerable change through urban renewal.”

Significantly, the plan was directly tied to the future of Wesleyan. Its projects were to be funded in part by a federal credit that would match “the amount of certain expenditures made by a college, university, or hospital for acquisition of land for expansion if it is within or near the renewal project.” This credit covered most of the anticipated cost to Middletown taxpayers of the projects, and in doing so evaded a municipal legal requirement for a public referendum, which had stalled the earlier

55 Commission, Plan, 1-2.
56 Commission, Plan, 3.
57 Commission, Plan, 23.
58 Commission, Plan, 46.
59 Commission, Plan, 3.
Center Street project.\textsuperscript{60} The 1958 referendum had been a serious roadblock because redevelopment was not only opposed by the politically mobilized Black community of the South End, but also by a group called the Taxpayers Association. The group’s members were mostly Whites of European immigrant communities and consisted of residents, small business owners, and republican political leaders. In their view redevelopment was a false vision of progress, designed to “accommodate passers-by,” and one that would have “dire consequences to merchants already doing business in the area” while unnecessarily uprooting and scattering an entire community.\textsuperscript{61} In the face of these sources of political resistance, the plan provided for the city and Wesleyan to work with mutual interest where the expansion of the university into the neighborhood between the east border of campus and the west side of Main Street underwrote urban renewal programs that were not even nominally approved by the public and would mold the downtown to facilitate the circulation of outsiders with spending power and ties to Wesleyan.

The way the plan narrates Middletown’s history as one of a once prosperous metropolitan commercial district was designed to serve a vision of downtown development that collapsed all social and material concerns into the ostensibly objective and universal economic need to attract regional consumer traffic to the “urban center.” Curiously, it is frequently acknowledged in the plan that most of Middletown was not actually “urban” at all. This is most clearly represented in a map showing the totality of the land area of Middletown. Color-coding represents various existing residential patterns, from rural to suburban to urban. The vast majority of the

\textsuperscript{60} Center, “Urban Renewal,” 13.

\textsuperscript{61} Center, “Urban Renewal,” 10.
map is either coded as rural or suburban, while a few small areas clustered around the
downtown and the Wesleyan campus are coded as urban. The downtown itself
appears as its own unit, encompassing Main Street and all of the side streets leading
east to the Route 9 boundary and west to Pearl Street, the imagined border of the
Wesleyan campus (fig. 2.1). The contemporary status of the downtown is obscured
in the map in a way that the rest of Middletown is not: it appears as a separately
shaded region undesignated in terms of land use, while two separate maps specifically
of the downtown area are not of existing uses but of its planned form after
redevelopment. In this representation it is dominated by a downtown retail center
that extends between a full and a half block East and West of Main Street along its
entire length. The rest of the area was to sport new buildings holding apartments,
offices, motels, and restaurants (fig. 2.2-2.3).

Figure 2.1. Middletown Land Uses. City Plan Comission, Middletown Plan of
Development 1965.

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62 Commission, Plan, 67.

63 Commission, Plan, 68-9.
Figure 2.2. *Downtown Area Retail Center*. City Plan Commission, *Middletown Plan of Development 1965*.

Figure 2.3. *General Plan: Central Area*. City Plan Commission, *Middletown Plan of Development 1965*. 
This was a vision of the downtown that called for the total destruction of working class neighborhoods to the East and West of Main Street, an area that was home to hundreds of people living primarily in multifamily, densely clustered houses. The plan offered no grand vision of the fate of the people who lived in these homes, instead imagining away their presence by omission. Thus the retelling of Middletown’s history as a “crossroads town” revolving around river “traffic” was not a simple or value neutral narrative decision. This was a very particular re-telling, one that completely focused on the history of wealthy merchants, and which served to invest the downtown area with a symbolic legacy consistent with the molding of Main Street around a particular kind of regional commerce (as opposed to the local commerce defended by the Taxpayers Association). This constructed symbolic legacy rendered the downtown a special zone, a pillar of prosperity to be resurrected for “all” of Middletown. It was thus made to seem logical and almost prophetic that its “development” be subject to public management in accord with the needs of a population that lived mostly in the suburbs (or at Wesleyan) and could benefit from the area only if it catered to regional consumerism.

This retelling as accompanied by the set of maps entailed the visual and conceptual erasure of existing aspects of the downtown, many of which conflicted with the represented ideal state of the city. The contemporary residents of the downtown are targeted for removal in the plan by being rendered invisible; yet representations of the downtown’s very much lived in neighborhoods as “blighted” actually underwrote fiscally (in the application for state and federal redevelopment funds) and conceptually (as the observable source of dysfunction, perceived by Whites of middle class status and overrepresented as an objective quality requiring
transformation) the entire process of redevelopment. The fact that a choice was made in the first map of Middletown as a whole to obscure the heavily populated state of the downtown, even though a separate map was included to specifically delineate the imagined form after redevelopment, suggests that in formal documents it was necessary to erase the contemporary status of the downtown in order to construct it as a symbolic core aligned with the larger conceptual framework of an economically obsessed vision of the city’s future—one that was semi-prophetically verified by a parallel narrative construction of lost (yet retrievable) economic prosperity.

This omission is a crucial indicator of a raced and classed spatial framework that was engendered by “blight” discourse and elaborated by the shift from the 1955 plan’s “rural character” to the paradigm of the symbolic urban core. At this time, the downtown was not actually imagined by city planners as an appropriate setting for working class residences. In contrast, the ideal subjects imagined to move through and live in the downtown were middle class and implicitly White, with spending power and/or institutional connections to places like Wesleyan, City Hall, and corporate businesses. The presence of financially poor Whites in the area was not represented because their proper place in city planners’ ideal vision was in the outer suburbs, and redevelopment activities would directly contribute to this transition by destroying neighborhoods and subsidizing the resettlement of White homeowners. Meanwhile, the presence of financially poor Blacks in the area was not represented because they did not have a proper place in this vision. Redevelopment activities would therefore constantly fail to provide housing up to the standards and needs of Black residents after their displacement.
This repeated, demonstrably planned failure depended upon the political disenfranchisement of the Black community as a whole and its consequences were meted out at the level of their neighborhoods. Meanwhile, their movement through stressed local support systems within the remaining enclaves of Black residency would be followed by the eye of the city planners, whose categorically anti-Black “blight” designations would underwrite further waves of redevelopment. Between 1965 and 1984 the redevelopment agency undertook the Metro South project, which involved 125 acres of residential area around the South End of Main Street. About one third of the six hundred households relocated from the area in this time were Black families. Just as in the highway construction, Court Place, and Center Street projects, Black residents were primarily renters and thus were eligible to receive very limited compensation and moving support relative to White property owners, and continued discrimination by White landlords ensured that most of the displaced would move into newly constructed public housing. Meanwhile, the efforts of SEFA activists to influence the layout of public housing projects, to ensure that they were built with high quality materials, to keep all of the housing in the downtown area, and even efforts to prevent the transport of cockroaches from South End housing to the new public housing development at Maplewood Terrace, were constantly and blatantly obstructed by city planning officials.

In the aftermath of the first stage of the Metro South redevelopment projects a group of historical preservationists associated with Wesleyan formed the Greater

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65 Center, “Urban Renewal,” 22.
Middletown Historical Preservation Trust and through this organization they were able to significantly influence redevelopment policy, arguing for the rehabilitation and reuse of structures that they deemed to hold particular kinds of historical value. That these arguments were placed directly in the service of redevelopment is obvious in the 1975 general plan. The plan’s first stated goal is to “preserve, protect, and enhance the historical, cultural, and natural resources and features of the community, and to preserve those elements that set the desireable [sic] and unique character of Middletown.”

This iteration of the general plan also includes a much-expanded historical section. The imperatives of redevelopment are linked here to the colonial founding of the city, described as motivated in part by “overcrowding in Massachusetts,” a point that is presented as an early example of the relationship between “[u]nplanned growth and urbanization” and migration to new areas. While the peak of Middletown’s growth is identified in the benefits of the “West Indies trade” for Middletown’s river-transport based merchant economy in the 18th century, the conscientious planning of roadways and the necessity of shaping the downtown area around particular notions of order are situated in the city’s origins with the point that in the early days of settlement, “[t]o prevent a surprise Indian attack, a large area was cleared, the antecedent of our present wide main thoroughfare.” The narration goes on to situate the redevelopment projects of the 50s and early 60s as part of this legacy of planning for safety and order. This connection stands in contrast to a narration of transportation planning failure in the 19th century, when selfish individual

66 Planning, Amended Plan, v.
67 Planning, Amended Plan, C2-C3.
68 Planning, Amended Plan, C9.
economic interests prevented the city from obtaining a railroad line to connect its agricultural and manufacturing products to regional markets. It claims, “Without quick and efficient transportation to and from other Connecticut points, life in Middletown became low key.”

This historical section accomplished a number of related goals. By elaborating on the history of Middletown as a once-thriving commercial zone, and by invoking the possibilities of failure and decline for the city as a whole if this special quality was not revived, it reinforced the redevelopment imperatives of shaping the downtown in relation to commercial circulation, as framed in terms of the pressing need to capture the potential consumers of the region. This elaborate narration also incorporated the demands of progressive preservationists who had concerns for the “special historical character” of the downtown and reacted with dismay to the widespread destruction of old buildings. Meanwhile, this act of incorporation provided the planners with a newly benevolent tone encompassing a wider concern for “local needs,” making the process seem more democratic and sensitive without responding to the demands of the affected people in any way. The complicity of these two parties in the continued displacement and disfigured representation of financially poor Black communities is not surprising. It does not require a close reading to demonstrate that this origin narrative inscribed a racialized threat to safety and order with the figure of the “Indian.” Meanwhile, its identification of Middletown’s peak of prosperity with the “West Indies trade” performs a naturalization of Black

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69 Planning, Amended Plan, C13.
disenfranchisement and exploitation by fondly recalling a time when Middletown’s entire economy revolved around plantation slavery in the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{70}

Preservation is presented in the plan not just in terms of sensitivity to history but as an active process specifically concerned with preserving a particular “desirable character,” and the planners and preservationists had a shared vision of this character. In some respects the goals of preservationists and the SEFA were mutual, in that the SEFA leaders also wanted to prioritize the rehabilitation and reuse of buildings over all-out neighborhood clearance.\textsuperscript{71} Yet the incorporation of these demands via concepts of historical preservation left all of the power in the hands of largely White middle-class preservationists and city officials to establish what was worth preserving, as well as how and why it should be preserved. Therefore the “desirable and unique character of Middletown” would be preserved in accord with a very particular conception of Middletown’s history as articulated to the fundamental goal of dismantling poor and especially Black neighborhoods in the downtown area. The “preservation” of a history that focused on the merchants who benefited from the movement of capital and commodities through Middletown and its waterfront as a focal point of the region entailed the erasure of the more recent working class history of the neighborhoods targeted by redevelopment. A history of labor might have situated the downtown and especially the waterfront as historically a working class residential area dominated by buildings that had housed an industrial workforce of migrants from Europe and the U.S. South. Instead, the envisioned ideal downtown to

\textsuperscript{70} This history has been well treated by the Middlesex Historical Society in the exhibit “A Vanished Port: Middletown and the Caribbean, 1750-1824,”

\textsuperscript{71} McFadden-Winchell, “Redevelopment Remains: Encounters with Middletown’s City-As-Archive,” 42-43.
be redeveloped for mobile consumers with money to spend is supported by a calculated historical narration of Middletown’s symbolic heart as defined by regional traffic. Thus the ostensibly objective economic logic behind city planners’ obsessive focus on improving Main Street relied on a specific conception of downtown space, itself supported by a highly subjective retelling of history.

At a deeper level, this story of colonial beginnings is an explicitly White history that has no place for the Black residents of the downtown area in the general history of Middletown. At the end of the opening statements of the 1975 plan are two paragraphs dedicated to demonstrating planners’ commitments to community participation: “Citizen involvement in planning is essential […] information from Middletown citizens was obtained BEFORE a final version of the plan.”\textsuperscript{72} These statements must be read as direct responses to the SEFA activists and their consistent criticism of the city government for not disclosing information about planning before decisions were made nor allowing Black residents influence over these decisions. Concurrently, Middletown is characterized by the plan as “a dynamic community of diverse elements: a strong Yankee heritage, an ethnically aware population […].”\textsuperscript{73} Among the goals of the plan is the intent “[t]o provide and maintain a supply of high quality housing, which can accommodate a population of diverse economic levels, [and] ethnic backgrounds […]”\textsuperscript{74} These statements make vague reference to race and diversity that could conceivably include both the working class White and Black populations of the downtown, all while emphasizing an implicitly White, “Yankee”

\textsuperscript{72} Planning, \textit{Amended Plan}, ix. Emphasis in original.

\textsuperscript{73} Planning and Zoning Commission, \textit{Amended Plan of Development}, 1975, v.

\textsuperscript{74} Planning, \textit{Amended Plan}, vii.
heritage. In this way demands of racial equity were absorbed, via a language embracing “diversity,” into a vision of the future that ostensibly included all residents without making any major policy changes. Meanwhile, Black leaders’ efforts to be part of the planning process were repeatedly shut down. The retelling of Middletown history therefore performed work at many scales, enhancing the legitimacy of redevelopment as a project that served the “general welfare,” while telling a White history that excluded Black people from its portrait of the social whole of Middletown, in concert with their exclusion from the planning process that so dramatically affected their lives.

It is interesting and significant that the implicitly White heritage was named specifically as a “Yankee” heritage. Although the mostly working class White European immigrant population of the redevelopment area did not generally experience the same intensity of displacement faced by the Black population, the sustained resistance of the Taxpayers Association indicates that some of their perspectives were more aligned with those of their Black neighbors than with those of city planners. The new historical backdrop that city planners were constructing for redevelopment policy excluded the experiences of both groups by centering the history of wealthy “Yankee” merchants as the historical precedent for the proposed mode of (economic) redemption for the city.

McFadden-Winchell’s discussion of the preservation of the Southmayd House and the creation of the Main Street Historic District is indicative of the role played by preservationists in the conceptual and material work of enacting this dual exclusion. By 1975 the redevelopment agency had purchased most of the properties on lower William Street, with the intent to clear its many multi-family houses and remake the
area as part of the new shopping district and accompanying parking lots. For decades these houses had been part of a large working class neighborhood of both White and Black residents, a community of migrants and their descendants, who had for the most part arrived in Middletown seeking employment in the early 20th century and post-WWII industrial economy. Yet in their desire to preserve the historical and cultural “resources” of the “community” from the destructive process of redevelopment, preservationists reached back to a very different historical legacy. A house lived in by multiple generations of Polish immigrants and their descendants would be moved from the redevelopment area to Main Street and totally transformed in order to reflect a history that had long been practically irrelevant to its place in the community. It became the Southmayd House, built for the White “Yankee” sea captain William Southmayd in 1747.

This becoming required an imaginative process of restoration, in which the house was “stripped to a shell” and rebuilt to reflect the “Federal Style” of architecture that would have characterized its appearance in the 18th century. It would be put on display on Main Street and converted into office space, in order that it might serve as “a reminder of our heritage, while at the same time continuing to have a useful economic life”75 The “we” imagined as universal by planners and preservationists around “our heritage” entailed the active devaluation and erasure of a working class history. Instead it focused on a merchant class family, and therefore a notion of heritage that enforced the regional commerce obsession of planners’ visions of Main Street, Middletown’s symbolic core, as preordained. Meanwhile William Southmayd (the historical figure made to represent the symbolic past of

Middletown’s future) was a ship captain whom, like many of his class in Middletown at the time, primarily made his living by transporting cargo from Connecticut to the Caribbean. This livelihood revolved entirely around the economy of plantation slavery. It was unthinkable for city planners and preservationists to consider the contemporary homes of working class Blacks or Whites to carry symbolic value; the histories of these groups were deemed irrelevant when considered at all, and this is unsurprising, because the very act of neighborhood clearance had made the reclaiming of the Southmayd house possible in the first place. Meanwhile, the shrine to the historical legacy being assembled at this time also entailed the valorization of the history of slavery. Thus the reconstructed history of the Southmayd house not only supported the idea of a prosperous and middle-class future of regional commerce, as engendered by a symbolic “Yankee” past—it also held a historical precedent for the active exclusion of Black people from the most basic privileges understood to accompany general social belonging, as habitually enacted by the violence of redevelopment policy.
Chapter 3: Assimilation and “The Encounter”

In my last chapter I will draw connections between city planning for the North End from the 1990s through to the present and the history of the redevelopment of the South End. One of the goals of the argument will be to demonstrate that these have been part of the same, relatively continuous historical process, their policies marked by similar political problems and struggles. This continuity (and indeed the history of the South End itself) is habitually effaced by city officials and others in the more contemporary conversations about redevelopment in the North End, even though the neighborhoods were part of essentially the same residential area before the redevelopment process, and plans for North End redevelopment were drafted as early as 1960. At the same time the terms of discourse have changed in important ways, and these should be examined in order to better understand the repetition of this historical pattern.

The most significant change in redevelopment discourse has been a reversal of emphasis in the establishment of priorities. The neighborhood clearance projects of the 1950s and 60s were primarily framed by the priority of attracting White middle-class shoppers to the downtown by providing them with an environment that they (and, empirically speaking, only they) could experience as comfortable and safe. This priority was understood as universally beneficial by those who subscribed to it, with the “improvement” of the living conditions of the very poor imagined to follow naturally on the coattails of the growth of the economic assets of Main Street properties and businesses. In contrast, North End redevelopment was framed as a direct provision for the welfare of the very poor by city officials, one that could be
made consistent with the ostensibly universal benefits of the growth of Main Street economic assets. This reversal was also paralleled by another: whereas the earliest general political organization in the Black communities of the downtown area was a reaction to redevelopment, the political momentum that led to major redevelopment in the North End actually originated at least in part from the political agitation of the Black and Latinx residents of the North End itself. In the final chapter I will argue that this agitation became the source of momentum for redevelopment policy as a result of the opportunistic expropriation of urgency on the part of city officials, in which resident experiences of injustice and insecurity were forcibly made to serve city planners’ existing vision of redevelopment and notion of “general welfare”, which were essentially consistent with those of the 1950s. But this was an important difference from the earlier periods of redevelopment, which were undertaken in constant and direct opposition to Black political resistance. These discursive shifts must be understood in relation to the various upheavals in American society represented by the Civil Rights movements of the 50s and 60s and the rippling effects of their ongoing aftermath.

Prior to these upheavals Middletown was intensely segregated. Although poor European immigrant and Black residents lived in the same general area, the segregation of the city as a whole was partially reflected within these neighborhoods. Black tenants were for the most part only able to rent apartments in a specific area by the South End waterfront, where the housing was some of the worst in the city due to the negligence of the White property owners. The oral histories of the “Black Perspectives on Middletown” project demonstrate that this segregation, and the attendant conditions of material poverty experienced by Black people in Middletown,
were the result of systemic and institutionalized mechanisms of discrimination at all levels of society, including employment, housing, and higher education opportunities. Although early redevelopment projects and their discourse of “blight” did displace the also generally poor European immigrant population of the downtown neighborhoods, they offered direct opportunities for socioeconomic advancement to these groups, and displaced Whites could rent new apartments or purchase new homes wherever they were available. These were all opportunities from which Black people were systemically excluded.

In this context, the neighborhood clearance projects in the South End were the culmination of a process that had been occurring for decades, in which European immigrants in Middletown were assimilated into the category of the norm represented by the White middle-class, if secondarily so at first. Based on the interviews of two men of Italian heritage, conducted contemporary to the “Black Perspectives” project, it is clear that although members of their communities had some access to home ownership and varied employment opportunities immediately upon migrating to Middletown in the early Twentieth Century, the Italians did initially experience themselves as a minority to some extent. Labella mentioned with pride that he “was the first member of Italian extraction” to attend “Board of Education meetings,” while Annino offered a long list of the first Italians to hold certain positions of status in Middletown society. From both men’s perspectives Italians were able to make their way out of their initial poverty by virtue of hard work, but also because of the specific egalitarian nature of American/Middletown society as met with the specific cultural background of Italian immigrants. In Dr. Labella’s view, although the Italians initially had only their “brawn” to contribute as working-class laborers, “they came from
countries that were highly civilized in the first place,” and this quality was well received by the people of the U.S. and Middletown: “[t]here is no other country in the world that I know of where strangers in a strange land can […] in a very short time, feel at home and feel that they are part and parcel of their adopted country.” On this basis Italians were “Americanized,” not only improving their own situation by “long hours of work and their sacrifices,” but also contributing to the “cultural development” of society overall.\(^76\)

This view contrasts greatly with prolific insights offered by James Moody, from a position within the poor Black community and reflecting on the society of Middletown in general. When asked about what life was like for different social groups in Middletown during the depression he replied that “it had a tendency to bring most people together,” specifically the “whites and the colored,” because “all of us was broke, didn’t have nothing, didn’t have anything and you’d be surprised how nice the whites and the colored got along then. We were all in the same boat.”\(^77\) But when things began to improve economically and more Black people began moving to Middletown, Moody said that the Whites were the primary beneficiaries of this change, and that the poor Whites began to treat Black people differently. In the interview he identifies a paradox where to be seen as Black was more of a barrier to assimilation into Middletown society than to speak a different language. As an example Moody recalls how an Italian man “who couldn’t even talk English” told

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\(^77\) James Moody, 1976.
him “Why you no stay-a-home where youse belong?” This suggestion vexed Moody, because in his own self-understanding he was “part Indian, part White and I’m part Negro […] Now where am I supposed to go back?” From his perspective, it was not actual heritage, culture, language, history, or economic class status that gave coherence to the society of Middletown, but rather the ascription of differential degrees of social value to individuals/groups based on their placement in relation to the White/Black racial principle. And although there were degrees to this differential as it was played out in the social hierarchy, as in the case of “the Puerto Rican race,” who Moody saw as caught in a “bad spot” because “he thinks he’s better than Blacks” but is nonetheless subordinated to Whites, the fundamental principle was the Black/White binary. Thus, in Moody’s analysis, “the largest minority in the United States, [is] the Negroes. But they push the [European ethnicities] all together—whites […] in order to protect themselves […] they fused themselves together.”

Dr. Labella’s retrospective assertion that the “civilized” cultural background of the Italians and their “long hours of work” were responsible for their incorporation into the society of Middletown was unconsciously blind to this racial principle, even as it elaborated its fundamental logics. Here Labella made an implicit comparison with a long historical precedent: the constructed binary of civilized/uncivilized had been indispensable to the institution of the societies of the Western world since the very beginnings of European colonialism. Europeans had projected this principle through their representation of the indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas as “irrational/subrational,” and it was only by way of this projection that the inseparable


historical processes of colonization and enslavement were understood by Europeans to be a legitimate basis for a society.\textsuperscript{80} This principle was also of course the original conceptual basis for the social phenomenon that we now conceptualize as “race.” In consequence, and in spite of the fact that Moody traced his ancestry in complex fashion to Africa, Europe, and the Americas, Whites’ perception of him as simply “Black” meant he could only have a normatively legitimate claim to an ancestry that was already encoded as irrational/uncivilized within the European/Euro-American imaginary—including the Italians’. It was only on this basis of this exclusion the Italian man quoted by Moody could experience himself as the norm, even though he had recently immigrated himself and had not yet been assimilated at the level of language. The same was true for Dr. Labella.

This racial principle was operative at all levels of Middletown society, with both the systemic/institutionalized material poverty that Black people were forced to experience and the relative assimilation experienced by European immigrants as its effects. Yet Whites in Middletown could not conceive of the workings of reality in this way, particularly European immigrants like Dr. Labella, for whom pride in socioeconomic achievement and incorporation as “part and parcel” of an ostensibly egalitarian free society was an important source of identity. As such, Dr. Labella’s retrospective claim to a “civilized” European ancestry (as opposed to the ostensibly “uncivilized” ancestry of Blacks) constituted an indispensable explanatory principle for his understanding of his social reality. Without it he would have been forced to confront the reality that Middletown was not an egalitarian society, and that European

immigrants had been assimilated to the category of the norm on the basis of the exclusion of Black people. Instead, within the binary terms of this principle, the realities of racialized inequality (as these persisted at the time that Dr. Labella was interviewed) were made to seem normal and natural.

The destruction of the tent city by Black protestors after the first neighborhood clearance project in 1950 was the opening thrust of the local struggles that would be waged by the Black community of the South End against this principle and its effects, and this in the broader context of the national Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. The significance of this initial protest was that it constituted a series of empirical and conceptual challenges made in defiance of the position that Black people were forced to occupy at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Both the act of neighborhood clearance that made way for Acheson Drive and the construction of the tent city in Hubbard Park had been ostensibly carried out with the “general welfare” in mind: the “slums” had to be destroyed so that “everyone” could benefit from the growth of Main Street commercial health; meanwhile the tent city had been built to replace the “blighted” and “substandard” structures that were judged a threat to the public health. The Black protesters’ destruction of these tents deconstructed the violent representational system of “blight” discourse by deeming the city’s tents “uninhabitable” relative to their former homes. In doing so they revealed the vast empirical gap between the well-being secured by city planners’ notion of the general welfare, and the actual well-being of residents of Middletown as a whole, particularly the well-being of the Black poor. This empirical challenge was based on a conceptual one, which proposed that Black people were not socioeconomically deviant or

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81 Willard McRae, 1976.
dysfunctional, but rather systemically subordinated by the dominant institutions of society—including the city government.

The numerous waves of Black political organization that followed this initial protest over the next three decades would force a partial disruption of the segregation of Middletown. The resistance posed by the South End Family Association, although constantly repressed by city officials, made significant gains both materially and politically; most importantly by forcing city planners to at least claim to incorporate the demands of the Black community of the downtown area into redevelopment policy. Although most of the interviewees of the “Black Perspectives” project were in agreement that the general racism of White society in Middletown had changed little between the 1920s and the mid-1970s, they also agreed that certain meaningful changes had taken place. James Moody would comment that although the economic situation for Black people was not much better, things had improved because at least now they could apply for many different types of jobs, as opposed to their restriction to purely manual and domestic labor previously. Bertha McRae would make a similar point, saying that although things were not much different, some Black people had managed to get houses in the suburbs: “Everywhere you go you find them. I don’t care how rich the neighborhood is, you find a Black. That happened about fifteen years ago.” Most of the interviewees were also asked to comment on a contemporary controversy in which the Middletown Elks Club had been revealed to be formally accepting only White members. The fact that this was a public scandal in the first place was only because of the transformations occasioned by the Civil Rights Movement and its reverberations in Middletown. Thus the challenges made to redevelopment, as an expression of the racial principles structuring Middletown
society, by Black activists during this time can be seen to have been part of a larger confrontation that caused a direct change in the normatively acceptable terms of public discourse.

Even so, these were surface level changes, the limits of which can be observed in the coverage of the Civil Rights Movement by the *Middletown Press*, specifically in the days and weeks following the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. For several days after this event most sections of the newspaper, from the front-page features to the letters to the editor, overwhelmingly focused on King’s death. Although taken together these articles are marked by clamor and discord, King’s assassination was unequivocally seen as a great tragedy. Indeed, a few days after his death approximately 4,000 people participated in a silent march in Middletown to pay respect to his legacy, an act of solidarity that was covered extensively in the *Press*. 

Furthermore, the flags on all municipal buildings were set at half mast, and a commemorative event was held at Wesleyan University, emphasizing King’s preaching of non-violent resistance.

A dramatic dichotomy is present between this coverage and the equally extensive coverage of the protests that were erupting in cities all over the country, and particularly in large Connecticut cities, ubiquitously represented as violent riots. These events were covered in such a way as to emphasize the tragedy of the loss of the icon of *non-violent* resistance, and they were often actually described as forms of violence that reiterated that of King’s assassination. One journalist likened “snipers, crouched behind darkened windows” who “shot at firemen battling stubborn blazes

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82 “Large Crowd Joins March of Silence,” *Middletown Press* (Middletown, CT), April 8, 1968.

83 “Local Tribute is Paid to Doctor King,” *Middletown Press* (Middletown, CT), April 5, 1968.
set by looters and arsonists on Chicago’s West Side” to the sniper who shot King himself.\textsuperscript{84} The most common description was of “bands of Negroes” who “roamed the streets” wreaking havoc, with particular attention paid to “unrest” in the nearby cities of Hartford and New Haven.\textsuperscript{85}

Although the situation in Middletown was characterized in one very brief article as “quiet” compared to the “rioting and looting [that] occurred in cities elsewhere,” this same article relayed an incident in which “a plate glass window […] on Main Street was broken by rocks. It was believed to have been done by a group of four youths, said to be Negroes […] One suspect was questioned by police but no action was taken.”\textsuperscript{86} In this way the article rendered the racialized threat of chaos very personal and close to home, in a discussion that was based entirely on hearsay but nonetheless reiterated the representation of young Black men as the embodiment of a violent threat to social order. Tagged onto the end of the article was the comment that “Police this morning were investigating the complaint of a local woman who said she was sexually assaulted by four youths.” This implicitly racialized accusation based on an unacknowledged but obvious process of extrapolation reiterated exactly, in representational form, the violence of some of the most iconic events that in their public life had provided momentum to the national Civil Rights movements in the first place—namely, the murder of a young Black boy, Emmett Till, in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of offending a White woman.

\textsuperscript{84} “Troops Help Quell Riots in Several Cities,” \textit{Middletown Press} (Middletown, CT), April 6, 1968.


In a letter to the editor on August 6, 1968, James “Cup” Moody (likely the son of the James Moody that was interviewed for the “Black Perspectives on Middletown” oral history project in the mid-1970s) put forward a view that bridged the dichotomy of the broader Press coverage:

*Editor, Middletown Press:* For every loss there is a gain. We have lost a leader, but we did not lose the followers. Let us realize that we are engaged in a war in this country, a war against hate and deceit. How shall we fight it? I am militant in the same sense that our forefathers were militant. They wanted a change; therefore they fought for it. Martin Luther King was the greatest in my opinion, except that I did not go along with his program wherein ‘you bash me over the head and I pray for you.’ I would be glad to join with my opponent in a moment of meditation after the encounter. We have not lost; we have gained! God have mercy.

James “Cup” Moody, 29 Sumner Street

In this statement, Moody appears to endorse the widespread (and indeed, violent) revolts that were so extensively and disparagingly covered by the Press. He apparently saw these eruptions as part of a necessarily violent response to a system of subordination that was equivalent to a war, a response that, however grave, held potential as part of the struggle for a better future. This perspective constituted a revolt against the mainstream representations of these events made by White authors, instead proposing that they were political in nature. From this point of view, when a demonstration of Black protestors in the North End of Hartford was broken up by police using tear gas, and the protesters declared “you cops killed Martin Luther

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88 James “Cup” Moody, “We Have Gained,” *Middletown Press* (Middletown, CT), April 6, 1968.
King!”, there is no lapse of logic.\textsuperscript{89} This is rather a clear elucidation of the many layers of complicity and violence necessary to enact the exclusion of Black people from the privileges of social incorporation, which is theorized here as simultaneously national in scope and highly localized. Concurrently, with Moody’s perspective the specific acts of destruction made by Black protesters on the iconic institutions of consumer capital—Main Street storefronts—come into view as a militant critique of the injustices inherent to the emergent economic order, as it was being crafted on the basis of Black displacement through redevelopment.

\textsuperscript{89} “Negroes Riot in North End of Hartford: Tear Gas Used on Youths,” \textit{Middletown Press} (Middletown, CT), April 5, 1968.
Chapter 4: The “Low-Life” Principle

The *Press* coverage of Black protests/“riots” and their destruction of Main Street storefronts in cities all over the country, in the midst of a broader conversation that essentially deified Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, was a key indicator of the formative transition occasioned in Middletown society by the Civil Rights Movement at its local and national scales. Sylvia Wynter has argued that prior to the social movements of the 1950s and 1960s, the institutionally guaranteed White/Black segregation of American society performed an indispensable symbolic role as the iconographic “verification” of the principle by which the White middle classes legitimized their dominant social status. This principle was the idea of a “pre-selected genetic value differential between human hereditary variations,” described by Wynter as the principle of “eugenic/dysgenic” descent, the contemporary expression in biocentric/racial terms of the original civilized/uncivilized, rational/irrational principle.\(^\text{90}\) Just as the inseparable historical processes of colonization and slavery could only be seen as legitimate within the terms of the earlier “rational/irrational” principle, the segregation of American society prior to the Civil Rights Movement could only be seen as legitimate within the terms of the racial principle of “eugenic/dysgenic” descent. In Wynter’s framework, the empirical reality of segregation as it determined the unequal distribution of material and political resources, with its mandate that the Black population as a whole would be politically disempowered and economically poor, “served to absolutize” or “verify” this racial

principle of genetic value as the “icon” of its expression in the real world. Thus by observing the institutionally produced realities of racial inequality guaranteed by the segregation system, the White middle classes could legitimate to themselves their dominant social status, *as if it were* the result of a natural/“pre-selected” genetic superiority, as opposed to the empirical reality that this social order was maintained by violent and exploitative mechanisms of subordination.

In the case of Middletown, the verifying function that the segregation system performed in the minds of Whites of middle class status can be most directly observed in the logics of “blight” discourse: the systemically and institutionally *guaranteed* conditions of material poverty that Black people were forced to live in were represented by city planners as resulting from endemic socioeconomic deviance/dysfunction. These conditions were therefore perceived in a way that “verified” the validity of the White/Black binary and attendant social value differential that was their *actual* cause, leading to policies that would ritually (re)enact Black displacement, with redevelopment as only one of the many forms of systemic-institutional subordination required to maintain the relative socioeconomic status positions of the White and Black populations.

In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, however, the ability of the White/Black binary alone to perform this “verifying” function of the social order had been partially disrupted. By forcing local and national scale confrontations with the racial principle and “exposing all of the injustices” inherent to the segregated social structure, the activists of this era challenged its conceptual foundation and shifted the

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91 Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved,’” 51.

92 Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved,’” 68.
normatively acceptable terms of public political discourse. Meanwhile, the direct political gains forced by these struggles made possible the very limited formation of a Black middle class. Thus in Middletown, although redevelopment would actually deepen the segregated organization of the city by breaking down once semi-mixed residential areas, relocating the majority of the Black population to subsidized housing projects and promoting the European immigrant population’s movement to the suburbs, Bertha McRae would observe that as early as the 1960s it was possible to “find a Black” in any neighborhood, no matter how wealthy.

In this context, as this change was related to the national transition from an industrial to a consumer economy (a shift inaugurated in Middletown with the neighborhood clearance projects that made way for Acheson Drive and Route 9), the White/Black racial principle would no longer be iconized/“verified” in the total segregation of society. Instead, as Sylvia Wynter argues, this iconography would be elaborated in the representation of economically defined social categories, as a “new variant of the eugenic/dysgenic status organizing principle” in the terms of “owners/non-owners,” “jobholders/non-jobholders.” And this “new variant” would directly parallel the White/Black binary of segregation, as it would be primarily expressed in the contrasting socioeconomic status of “the suburban middle classes (who are metonymically White), and the inner city category of the Post-Industrial Jobless (who are metonymically young Black males).”

93 The representational system that would elaborate this “new variant” as the central one is reflected exactly in the dichotomous Middletown Press coverage of the Black protests/“riots” in Main Street commercial districts all over America that followed the assassination of Martin

93 Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved,’” 53.
Luther King. This example directly parallels the representational system analyzed by Sylvia Wynter in reference to the early 1990s uprisings in South Central Los Angeles following the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles Police, and in particular the “N.H.I/No Humans Involved” designation used by LA judicial officials to “refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos.”

Although cross-racial assimilation occurs in both directions, the jobholder/non-jobholder line is merely the current mode of the White/Black racial principle as it has adapted in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement.

In this chapter, I argue that the wave of redevelopment to which the North End of Middletown has been subjected between the 1990s and the present can only be understood alongside Sylvia Wynter’s proposed shift of emphasis in the expression of the racial principle, as an indispensable function of the maintenance of our existing social order. The first redevelopment projects of the 1950s were a culminating moment in the expression of the White/Black principle as expressed and “verified” in the near total segregation of the city. The redevelopment projects in the area of Ferry Street, Green Street, and Rapallo Ave of the early 2000s must be seen as a culminating moment in the now entrenched shift of emphasis of the White/Black binary to the jobholder/non-jobholder, owner/non-owner distinction, as metonymically represented by the constantly theorized dichotomy between the (Black) poor of the inner-city and the (White) middle class of the suburbs. Thus the claim of the city planners of this era to directly serve the welfare of North End residents with redevelopment would only be articulated in terms that excluded anyone

94 Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved,’” 42.
of low-income and especially no-income status, by way of the ritually represented figures of the “Section 8 tenant,” the “social service dependent,” i.e. the non-jobholders/non-owners, as these were constantly equated with the figure of the “criminal.”

Sylvia Wynter has also argued that the status organizing principles instituting of a given society tend to be encoded in the symbolic content of that society’s origin narratives. Thus in our contemporary situation the grand origin narrative of Evolution—with its proposal of the human as a purely biological organism, naturally selected in the context of “natural scarcity,” with relative socioeconomic success analogically imagined to indicate differential degrees of “fitness”/ability amongst different social groups—serves to encode the “eugenic/dysgenic” status organizing principle of our society. It is by virtue of this principle alone that the collective, systemic-institutional production of profound inequality particularly along racial lines can be projected onto the imagined agency of economic laws.95 The new historical narrations of the downtown that have partially contextualized the most recent wave of redevelopment (and which have been superimposed upon the previously dominant narrative of the Yankee Innovator, master of regional commercial circulation) serve as a specific subset of this larger encoding origin narrative, and they have been indispensable to maintaining the legitimacy of the ritual displacements of redevelopment.

By the time of the first concrete planning for North End redevelopment, the process of assimilation to the category of the norm was essentially complete for the European immigrant population in Middletown. This point is most poignantly

95 Wynter, “1492,” 5-57; Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved,’” 42-73.
demonstrated by the surnames of the team of public officials who made up the newly assembled North End Task Force (NETF) in the late 1980s: Corvo, Giuliano, Guilmartin, Marselli, Pattavina, Perichi, Santangelo, and Shapiro. Although Whites of European immigrant ancestry had from the beginning experienced social mobility and general social incorporation that were never available to Black people, the fact that members of these more socially mobile groups now held prominent status as leaders of redevelopment policy was an important change. Consequently, North End redevelopment would be framed in part by a new understanding of historical preservation that incorporated the previously excluded history of the working-poor European immigrant residents of the downtown. This new preservationist impulse reiterated the existent exclusion of the historical experiences of Black residents from the history to be preserved, while Black and now also Latinx residents were now the primary inhabitants of the area around which this new paradigm of historical value was constructed within the discourse of redevelopment.

This narratively enacted exclusion should be understood as a response prescribed by the dominant (White middle class) subjective understanding of the realities of poverty and race, and in particular the forces understood from this perspective to govern socioeconomic achievement. There is an implicit comparison made by the way a European immigrant history is repeatedly made to serve as the frame of view for redevelopment policies that specifically target the neighborhoods of people of color. This comparison is between the socioeconomic achievements of the European immigrants, now for the most part assimilated to the White middle-class

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having ostensibly “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps” and attained optimal socioeconomic status, and the represented socioeconomic failure of Black groups to do the same.

The implicit thesis made by this comparison is that this “failure” is not the result of systemic-institutional mechanisms, but rather the same socioeconomic deviance that was imagined to emanate from the so-called “blighted” neighborhoods of the South End in the 1950s. From a European immigrant perspective, where the idea of self-improvement over generations forms a central component of individual and collective notions of achievement and identity, open conversation about their shared history with Black people in the downtown residential areas must be avoided. To acknowledge the fact that in the early 20th century both groups initially came to Middletown under relatively similar circumstances (very poor, seeking employment with better wages, travelling to a vastly different social context) and actually lived in the same neighborhoods, yet have not had the same experiences of economic success or social assimilation, would be to recognize that racial dynamics have shaped this society, and therefore also the relative socioeconomic success of European immigrant communities. The comparison described above cannot perform its function—which is to “verify” that the socioeconomic status of the (metonymically White) owners/jobholders is the result of individual and collective struggle and achievement, and that the socioeconomic status of the (metonymically Black) non-owner/non-jobholders is the result of individual and collective failure—if it is historicized in a way that actually includes Black experiences.

The initial report of the NETF in 1988 explicitly relates race, redevelopment, and this notion of history with a candidness that no other planning document I have
examined from any time period approaches, in the process revealing in clear terms the role played by the typically only implicit comparison of European immigrant and Black historical experiences. The North End is characterized in the report as suffering from “afflictions” that are the logical result of poor planning, “the same blight and neglect” that “the black and poor ghetto” of the South End was “saved” from by the urban renewal programs of the 50s and 60s. No redevelopment document I have read even from 1950-1984 made any such declaration of the South End as “black” or as a “ghetto,” and in my view the consistent and deliberate choice was made to reference such categories subtextually with the other terms “blight” and “slum.” The report declares that although these urban renewal projects did serve the “black and poor ghetto” well, they failed to provide enough housing for the displaced, and therefore many of the former South End residents “found accommodations at the North End which […] was being abandoned by second and third generation Italo-American families in favor of new, suburban homes in Westfield and South farms.” The “new influx of black families” as well as the migration of “Hispanics from Puerto Rico and Latin America placed new demands on available low cost housing,” while the “release of institutionalized citizens [from the Connecticut Valley Hospital] who suddenly became the problem of… social and public service organizations” and the “typical alcohol and drug problems of a community the size of Middletown, have finally created an acute crisis situation.” In this context, “the only alternative available to Middletown is to utilize the Housing Authority and Redevelopment Agency as tools to confront the housing and urban blight problems.”

97 Task Force, Report, 4-5.

98 Task Force, Report, 4-5.
In this passage, South End redevelopment is invoked as a “success” from a city planner’s perspective: it removed the poor Black population so that the area could become aesthetically and economically stable and productive. A proposed new wave of redevelopment is absurdly positioned as a benefit to this very group, even as its precursor is subtly criticized for not providing them with replacement homes. Black and Latinx North End residents are then positioned as problem migrants moving in behind White flight to the suburbs, and are represented in direct relation to the stigmatized category of the mentally ill, the social service users, and substance abusers; a positioning that stands in contrast to the socioeconomic achievements of “Italo-American families,” whose ostensible ability to compete economically allowed them to “abandon” the North End for the suburbs. Thus the passage projects a notion of deviance onto Black and Latinx residents that is the explanatory principle defining of both this group’s ostensible inability to compete and the socioeconomic achievements of European immigrants. The report would therefore only propose solutions that imperatively (re)enacted the violence that had always defined redevelopment.

The report is also a unique planning document in its detailed inclusion of the words of a resident of the neighborhood, drawn from a transcript of a public meeting held by the NETF in 1987 about the prospects of redevelopment in the North End. Ferry Street resident Felicity Markham began her testimonial by empathizing with other speakers’ expressed fears of walking on the North End of Main street, but was clearly disturbed by their representations of the residents of the area: “I’ve listened tonight to people explain how the people who live on Rapallo, Green and Ferry are drunks and stuff like. I really resent that. I have thoughts and feelings—I’m a human
being too.”99 She considered herself subject to conditions of institutional neglect, describing the serious cockroach and rat infestations of her home, the lack of fire alarms, the structural instability of her building, and the struggle to force her landlord to address any of these problems, as well as the constant presence of substance abuse, drug dealing, and threats of burglary in her neighborhood. She expressed appreciation for the efforts of the police, but concluded that the problems were beyond the scope of law enforcement and that the neighborhood was entitled to more than “[turning] the North End into a police state [….] every resident in the City should be ashamed for allowing a beautiful neighborhood to become such a lousy neighborhood […] you could level it and make it a parking lot and that would solve all your problems, but then I wouldn’t have a place to live.” One of her deepest frustrations was clearly with the lack of affordable housing in Middletown: “We do not live here because we choose to […] we don’t have options […] I don’t see affordable housing.”100

A few things become very clear in reading this testimonial. Markham had a complex historical, structural, and experiential understanding of the problems relative to her neighborhood, leading her to conclude that policing and neighborhood clearance would not be real solutions, and that these problems went beyond even an immediate material solution. While she believed that she was subject to material living conditions and a lack of general safety that were unfair, it is clear that in her view the cause of these problems could not be located in the isolated area of Ferry, Green, and Rapallo. The blame fell on “every resident in the City,” institutional neglect was a fundamental concern, and she saw a connection between this neglect


100 Task Force, “Testimony,” 2.
and the dehumanizing way in which outside observers projected their insecurities vis-à-vis homogenizing and othering representations of the people who were actually threatened by the effects of such neglect.

The paradox of redevelopment policy at this time is evident in the fact that although Markham’s potentially highly disruptive testimony was specifically chosen to be included in this report, it was being used to secure legitimacy, urgency, and grant money for neighborhood clearance. The ultimate (and sometimes explicitly stated) goal of these projects was the removal of low/no-income people from the area around Main Street, who were ubiquitously represented as “those individuals who are chronically irresponsible, financially, and who represent a drain on society through mismanagement of funds.”

This wording of “drain on society” not only suggested that poor people were not part of the “society” served by the city government; it also legitimated this exclusion in socio-Darwinist language, suggesting that this group had to be excluded in order to maintain the efficient utilization of collective resources that were ostensibly scarce. This systemic-institutionalized form of representation theorized the category of the jobless/homeless/social service dependent as a distinct, essential source of the socioeconomic deviance that was constantly projected onto the North End as a whole. In the process the institutional mechanisms that produced poverty were obscured, while the dominant social status of the (White) middle class was legitimated on the basis of their ostensibly superior competitive economic ability.

The view in the NETF report of the problems facing the North End and the policies that would best address them was thoroughly maintained in the more formal planning documents of the next few years. Two of the general planning documents

101 Task Force, Report, 4-5.
call directly for the removal from Main Street of “social services such as the unemployment office, the welfare office, soup kitchens or homeless shelters on Main Street. These uses detract greatly from the retail experience” and “contribute to a misleading perception of downtown.” These issues are accompanied by the demand for increased “presence of uniformed officers in the Central Business District,” a demand echoed by the 1992 document’s encouragement of the CBD as a location for “public services” (police, government, etc.) as opposed to “social services.” The fact that these suggestions were made based on the imperative of creating an environment specifically welcoming to White middle-class consumers is indicated by the frequent emphasis on the “perception of safety,” as opposed to actual safety for people living downtown. Meanwhile, this set of problems and solutions is implicitly targeted at the poor Black population, as the history of Black and Latinx migration narrated in the NETF report is recirculated by statements with subtexts, such as “the decline in the North End is attributed to the change…from working families to individuals who use charitable services.”

The provision of affordable housing in the North End is identified as a key goal in the two planning documents, but this goal is paradoxically embedded within direct calls for the removal of “low-income” people from the area. The 1990 North End Housing Development Report, in a rare moment of clarity, includes a 1988 summary of the statistics of high unemployment and homelessness in the downtown

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104 Development Office, Housing Development Zone, 37. Emphasis mine.
area. This section demonstrates that those with very low income had limited access to affordable housing, and that “Connecticut’s tremendous economic prosperity has not [sic] made a difference for the hard core unemployed and for the working poor. In fact, it has made things worse for them.” Yet other documents consistently and overwhelmingly emphasize the need to increase property values downtown, increase the proportion of market rate housing, and to cater to outside perceptions of the area (in one instance by suggesting the elimination of “undesirable” uses such as liquor stores, pawn shops, and check cashing establishments) and thus attract greater investment—all suggestions that are placed in direct relation to the “over concentration of lower income groups” and the idea that “the mixed character of the current population must be enhanced to attract more moderate and upper income groups.”

Although obviously aware on some level of the serious issues facing the mostly poor residents of the downtown, city planners continued to frame the entire vision of the city’s future around the obsessive management of the physical environment to attract wealthier outsiders, leading to such strange ideas as the regulation of air pollution in the downtown area for the sole purpose of increasing its capacity to absorb the added car traffic expected to accompany a larger number of consumers and moderate-high income residents. Thus commerce, public services, sidewalks, streets, building facades, landscaping, signage, lighting, and the air itself

105 Planning and Zoning, Guiding the Future, 1989, 147.


were to be managed by the city government according to a vision of the general welfare that was *directly underwritten fiscally* and *conceptually* by an anti-poor, anti-Black discourse.

The public dramas that would ultimately provide the city government with the sense of urgency necessary to redevelop the Ferry-Green-Rapallo neighborhood revolved around a series of shootings on Ferry Street, in particular the daytime killing of a local 16-year-old boy named Omar Irving on October 10, 1996. The Mayor at the time convened an “Urban Homesteading Task Force” (UHTF) to form relationships with residents in a process that led to the formation of the North End Action Team (NEAT). The group became a community advocacy non-profit that has ever since served as the primary interlocutor between the city government and North End residents collectively, as well as a primary partner with the city government in planning for redevelopment and demonstrating community support. In my reading of the documentary archive of this process, the proliferation of voices and organizations in response to the traumatic dramas surrounding Ferry Street in the 1990s is characterized by the demands of residents being absorbed into the top-down redevelopment ideology that had been around for decades, while the seriousness of the events to which resident demands responded lent the city government the urgency required to carry out redevelopment on its own terms.

A crucial document that is reflective of this process is the “The Middletown Report” (1998) of the Yale Urban Design Workshop (YUDW), the result of a two-

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day event in which Middletown city planners invited the “participatory urban design”
group to “hold a Workshop in order to develop a plan for the reinvigoration of the
city’s North End.” The principal stated goal of the workshop was to make
“community” voices and desires heard by planners, but “community” here was in no
way limited to people who lived in the “target area”: NEAT stood in for resident
perspectives, while other entities such as “local landlords” and “members of the
Wesleyan Community” and the Department of Planning and Zoning were specifically
consulted in preparation for the public workshop in order to ensure it was a
“community-based planning process.” The need for the inclusion of all of these
various institutional representatives is taken completely for granted, in spite of the
fact that the call for “reinvigoration” in the North End was in large part a topic of
public discussion because of the acute experiences of people living in the area of
Ferry, Green, and Rapallo. In reading the report it is clear that the proximity of this
neighborhood to Main Street was the defining common denominator linking its future
to the “general welfare” of the “city as a whole.” The result is the dilution of resident
corns, expressed over the course of two days, into a planning discourse that had
been taking shape for half a century.

A cursory reading of the report might leave one with the impression that city
planners had always been finely attuned to the genuine concerns of people living in
the neighborhood, because its recommendations (ostensibly responding to
“community” concerns) aligned with planning ideology almost perfectly. The most
consistently represented recommendations focused on increased policing and

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aesthetic improvements in order to enhance “perceptions” of the neighborhood from Main Street and promote a desirable and coherent “character” for the heart of the city. These aspects were reinforced by the identified need to cater to the “car image” and “pedestrian image” of Main Street by establishing the North and South Ends of the street as symbolic and recognizable “gateways” to the city.\textsuperscript{113} The approach was demonstrably anti-poor: the call for a coherent system of benches along Main Street required that they “discourage sleeping”; the recommendation to remove “No Loitering” signs from Main Street was premised not on the desire to prevent the monopoly of pedestrian consumers over public space, but on the idea that “[the signs] create an unfriendly environment for visitors and make it feel as if the neighborhood has a problem even when it doesn’t.”\textsuperscript{114} This last statement is telling in that a redevelopment conversation that ostensibly took its impulse from very serious resident experiences would erase and subsume them under the need for a friendly environment for consumers.

The most representative example of this dynamic is on the issue of public safety. Much like reports published by the city government at the time, \textit{actual} safety was understood here as less of a shared general concern than the \textit{perception} of safety.\textsuperscript{115} The issue of policing is a complex one, in that North End residents and community leaders consistently made demands on the city government for more protection and support from the Police Department, while official discourse around

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\textsuperscript{112} Yale, \textit{Middletown Report}, 3.
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\textsuperscript{113} Yale, \textit{Middletown Report}, 12.
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\textsuperscript{115} Yale, \textit{Middletown Report}, 21.
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policing was ubiquitously anti-Black and anti-poor. The emphasis on perception is a clear indicator of the absorption of an actual demand for safety into an approach to planning that was entirely focused on (White) middle class experiences of Main Street.

The most consistent and significant desire of people living downtown included in the report was for a neighborhood community center “that would provide adult education, a community bulletin board… [for] job opportunities, workshops for youth and elders… a program…[for] volunteering in community projects, after school programs…summer camps, a swimming pool…basketball courts, [and] a place to hold block parties.”116 Although this demand was meaningfully addressed in the report and a community center would be established in the early 2000s, it would be built around the self-serving and priority defining financial support of Wesleyan University, support which has subsequently been withdrawn. The 2008 undergraduate thesis of Stephanie Campbell O’Brien, “Middle-Class Middletown? Wesleyan University and the Reinvention of Urban Space” has treated this specific topic in excellent detail, and it will be further discussed in the conclusion of this thesis.

One particular suggestion of the report is representative of the way in which efforts to serve the needs of residents were disturbingly paternalistic, engaged in heavy handed forms of degrading representation, and centered the voices of outsiders in privileged positions, who nonetheless apparently made suggestions from a place of genuine concern. The “Neighborhood Ziggurat Project” was proposed as a way of convincing residents to care about their neighborhood and of embodying “figuratively and literally the high spirits and the hard work that has given the North End its

Three pages are dedicated to the concept of residents working together to build a monument on Green Street in the shape of a layered pyramid, a “spiral pattern of masonry” that would rise from the ground sporting flags for “groups of children to recognize the seasons, their schools, their nationalities and/or their city.” This idea suggests a “bootstraps” model of “self-help,” implicitly directed at people of color who are proposed to lack the industrious and prideful qualities that had ostensibly been responsible for the socioeconomic achievements of European immigrants.

A news article titled “Alley is a Dead End, and Home” and published in the *Hartford Courant* on October 2, 2005 is an illustrative example of the consequences of the White middle class hegemony over the terms in which reality was to be represented, and therefore interpreted. Appearing alongside numerous other articles published by the *Courant* and the *Middletown Press* about the Ferry Street neighborhood and redevelopment, the article attempts to offer an ethnographic lens through which outsiders might voyeuristically experience the social world of the North End, in the process saying more about the author as observer than about the place itself. The neighborhood as a whole is characterized via descriptions that juxatapose scenes of social deviance with acceptable social behavior, typically represented by the invocation of families and children: “Ferry Street alley, where junkies looking to buy crack step out of the way of baby carriages”; “From the nearby alley, a […] prostitute emerges and escapes into the vibrant community garden”; “children take turns pushing each other on a weathered Barbie Big Wheel or load dirt

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into toy trucks as 50 Cent pounds through a portable CD player in the alley.” These descriptions construct scenes of deviant criminality that are highly racialized; although the race of the individuals being described is never specifically identified, the author’s perspective is constantly marked by stereotypical signifiers of blackness, with one man needlessly described as “looking like rapper-turned-actor Ice Cube.”

The proposal of this observer is that although the residents of the Ferry Street neighborhood were categorically different from the rest of Middletown, there were degrees to this difference, with the most different (and therefore the least worthy of being “saved”) being the figures of the drug offender and sex worker. This is one extreme example of the status organizing principle of the non-jobholder/jobholder binary and its rhetorical enactment, undertaken through racialized representations of criminality/deviancy. City planner William Warner is quoted in the article, saying that “keeping out criminals” is one way of “attracting those in need of affordable housing who want a safe place to live” and getting the “neighborhood to a point where it’s stable enough that it doesn’t need community organizations to try and save it.” These comments are revealing: here outside planners and activists are positioned as saviors who might guide the neighborhood to socioeconomic achievement for the acceptable kind of poor people, as opposed to the ostensible deviance of its current residents, who are imagined to not even want a safe place to live. This representation, imaginable only from a middle class perspective, constitutes a rhetorical exclusion of its subjects not just from the category of the norm, but from the category of normative humanness. This exclusion was the fundamental basis for a redevelopment process

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119 Claire Griffin, “Alley is a Dead End, and Home,” Hartford Courant, October 2, 2005. Emphasis Added.
that laid claim to a universal notion of the “general welfare,” and even at times a specific claim to ensure the well-being of people of “low-income” status, all while enacting the displacement of the Black and Latinx poor of the downtown area.

In the two years after the publication of this article a major neighborhood clearance project would destroy most of the houses on Ferry Street and put in their place a large, three building high rise apartment complex called Wharfside Commons. NEAT leaders had waged political resistance against neighborhood clearance for years prior, pushing instead for redevelopment focused on rehabilitation of existing buildings, but ultimately all of the power was in the hands of the city government, with their continued ability to make “blight” designations, acquire federal “community development” grants to pursue their projects, and outsource costs to massive development corporations. It was only as a result of the work of NEAT that the neighborhood was not transformed entirely into a middle and upper-income residential area.

My understanding of this struggle is primarily informed by an interview conducted on March 27, 2019 with Cookie Quinones, who was the president of NEAT at this time. She was unequivocal in her assessment that in spite of the adamant claims of the city government that redevelopment was being done specifically to improve the living conditions of people in the North End by creating a larger amount of affordable housing, it was done in a way that constantly and directly pushed for their removal. The central injustice that Quinones identified with this process was that while most people who were relocated had expected to be able to return to the neighborhood after redevelopment to live in the new housing that was to be built, they were largely excluded from doing so because rents were too high, and
she believed that this event involved the partial breakup of an important neighborhood community. She drew a parallel between this situation and the city’s decision to demolish houses where she lived in the Miller-Bridge street neighborhood rather than invest resources in an area that has been systemically and infrastructurally abandoned by the city government. Planning Director William Warner had directly reproduced the discourse of the 1950s, labeling the area a “slum” that presented an unattractive picture to potential consumers driving by on Route 9. In contrast, Quinones recalled the regular complements she received from friends and neighbors every year at Christmas on her family’s elaborate decoration of their three-story house, which was beautifully visible from the highway. In her view the neighborhood remains one of the most special places in Middletown, as a secluded residential area that is insulated from the traffic of Main Street; but she also says that it has been seriously undermined by the city’s relocation of several families and demolition of their homes, as part of larger projects that were subsequently abandoned.

In our conversation she directly linked these injustices to the more long-term transformation of Main Street, with the increasingly overwhelming presence of unnecessary and expensive consumer establishments constituting the monopolization of public space by middle class people, while constantly pushing for the displacement of poor people and specifically people who are homeless. In reference to this process she expressed disdain for the use of the label “low-income” for people in her community, satirizing the term and its deployment by rephrasing it as “low-life.” This is a poignant turn of phrase, one that I think succinctly elucidates not only the subtleties of the rhetorical mechanisms by which redevelopment is enacted, but also the paradigm of social value of which it is an expression. What Quinones has
identified is dual in nature: in the context of the broader conversation, she has unequivocally outlined the vast gap between the “general welfare” served by city policies that revolve around Main Street economic growth and the actual well-being of the people most effected by these policies. And in this turn of phrase, she shows that these policies are enacted on the basis of a projected devaluation of human life, which operates through the symbolic content of the ostensibly objective, economic measure of “low-income” status.

A closer examination of the various redevelopment projects in the Ferry Street neighborhood reveals the constant work performed by this symbolic content, as well as the empirical gap between the claims of redevelopment as welfare and its actual effects. A representative of the Richman Group, the corporate developer for Wharfside Commons, is quoted in a 2006 Middletown Press article, the year before the actual completion of the apartment buildings, as saying “there will be no section 8 housing [….] We are building homes for people who work and want a nice, safe home.” The implication that people using Section 8 do not work or want (let alone deserve) a nice and safe home performs the equation of “low-income” with “low-life.” Ultimately the complex would accept Section 8 vouchers and have a certain amount of rent control, although it remains too expensive for many people.

Meanwhile, city planners have identified success in the project in the increase in the overall median area income and aggregate income density of the downtown that accompanied Wharfside Commons (by virtue of the fact that more renters, with

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relatively higher incomes, now lived in the neighborhood). These changes were seen as promising because they contributed to an increase in economic indicators and the potential for attracting outside investment in market rate housing and Main Street commerce. Thus the very same affordable housing complex that was constructed ostensibly out of concern for the most economically vulnerable people of the area was seen as successful by contributing directly to the process of displacement.

Tenants would also be subject to “financial screening” of “previous rental experiences and legal backgrounds,” while the “provision of security services” relative to the needs of specifically managers and landlords would also be provided by the Middletown Police Department. The complex is now under 24-hour surveillance by security cameras installed in collaboration between the MPD and the Richman Group. The very layout of Wharfside Commons seems to address this last goal. Planning documents of the time express deep anxiety about the ability of police to effectively manage crime in the densely clustered buildings on Ferry Street, where long alleys and the presence of open spaces out of view of the street were seen as an obstruction, as well as an abstractly defined drain on the potential for a “friendly neighborhood environment.” Large buildings with open-air stairwells and highly visible outdoor recreation spaces replaced these conditions, a layout that Cookie Quinones described as much less welcoming and less conducive to community

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relationships, particularly because it has not been available as a home for most of the people who once lived in the neighborhood.

The Nehemiah/Broadpark projects followed Wharfside Commons over the course of several years. They primarily rehabilitated buildings on Ferry, Green, and Rapallo and were the result of negotiations between NEAT leaders, local leaders of non-profit organizations, and city planners. The initiative was designed to accomplish two main goals: to provide much needed supportive housing for families that had been homeless; and to preserve the “special historical character” of the neighborhood, in accord with the specific narrative of a working class European immigrant history, a goal that was linked to a call for more home ownership opportunities in the North End generally.125

The Nehemiah Corporation development projects did rehabilitate several buildings and convert them into supportive housing units for families vulnerable to becoming homeless. But these projects nonetheless relocated many people who would not be able to return, whether they wanted to or not. The projects of the Broadpark developer were meant to provide homeownership opportunities at controlled and relatively affordable rates, based on making ownership possible for people with bad credit and insufficient income to pay at market rates. Yet this affordability was based around 30-year mortgage plans, which made homeownership possible at rental rates, but would require long-term, stable, and relatively high paying employment.126 According to a 2015 article in the Hartford Courant, a yearly


household income of $57,000 dollars would qualify a family of three for the program.\textsuperscript{127} As of 2016, median household income in the downtown area was $21,729.\textsuperscript{128} Whoever the imagined homeowners were, they were not the very poor former renters of the properties to be redeveloped. One 2006 publication by the Nehemiah Housing Corporation itself actually identifies the “over concentration of [the] special needs population and Section 8 vouchers” in the downtown area as a problem to be removed.\textsuperscript{129}

The very important material support offered in the Nehemiah projects should not be ignored here, but even these units have only been offered to particular tenants, selected on the basis of background checks into their legal and financial history. Moreover, there is no justifiable reason for why all of the refurbished units could not have been put to this purpose, with the explicit reason being the ostensible “need” to balance the costs of redevelopment with the returns that could be secured in its aftermath, and the implicit objective being to attract only the “right kind” of people (evaluated primarily on the metric of income) to this neighborhood and its proximity to Main Street. To be sure, many people who might not have been able to afford homeownership in the downtown now occupy the Broadpark units. Yet finding applicants who fit the restrictive income bracket has been a struggle for those involved in putting the project together, and many of the beautifully refurbished units remain unoccupied years after the completion of this project.\textsuperscript{130}


\textsuperscript{128} Census Reporter, “Census Tract 5416, Middlesex, CT,” 2016.

\textsuperscript{129} Nehemiah Housing Corporation, \textit{Three Rivers at the North End}, 2006, 11-12.

\textsuperscript{130} Beals, “Residents Slowly Moving.”
Success in these projects was articulated most often in terms of aesthetic improvement and historical preservation in the Middletown Press and in planners’ assessments. In the context of the implicit comparison I have argued is at the heart of the European immigrant working class history narrative and its reflexive exclusion of the long history of Black residency in the downtown area, the pairing of the homeownership program to historical preservation is telling. Part of this idea is that the Black people have not been able to rise in socioeconomic status in the same way as European immigrants because of difficult to breach economic barriers to homeownership. This is most certainly an institutional mechanism of great consequence; but the economic absolutism of this proposed solution and its inherently misleading comparison reiterates the idea that people with low/no-incomes are not systemically and institutionally made poor, but rather lack the ability to compete economically. The systemic representation of these groups in the terms of the normatively equated categories of jobless/criminalized ensures that they are completely excluded from any and all redevelopment proposals designed to secure the “general welfare,” presumed to be so deviant and economically dysfunctional as to be beyond “saving,” and therefore made to bear the symbolic weight and material costs of projected “low-life” status.

One of the most glaring contradictions at the heart of redevelopment policy, and one that is a pre-requisite for the assumption that people are poor because they cannot compete, has to do with the differential perception of the availability of resources. Every person interviewed over the course of my research has identified the

paradoxical claim of the city government that fiscal resources are too scarce to support the programs that poor people themselves identify as necessary to their well-being, in spite of the extravagant changes that redevelopment projects have wrought in the Main Street area. The examples are countless: the Middletown Area Transit bus system is essential for the many people who do not own cars to access medical care, grocery stores, and to be employed, yet it is chronically underfunded and regularly subject to budget cuts. Although this is a largely state funded program and city officials have put substantial pressure at the state level to maintain its budget, the issue has never been pursued with the kind of urgency or deployment of municipal resources that redevelopment projects have.

Another example is the case of Macdonough Elementary School, which has been an extremely important fixture in the community of the North End for decades, and is one of eight elementary schools in Middletown. For years the Board of Education has proposed the closure of one of these elementary schools to save money, and Macdonough is the only school consistently targeted for closure, in spite of adamant resistance from NEAT and people from the North End generally. The undergraduate thesis “It Matters Who You Sit Next To: Perspectives on Integration Policy in Middletown, CT” by Anna Flurry (2017) interrogates the direct relationship between this issue and the issue of school redistricting, where district boundaries have been redrawn in recent years with the specific goal of diverting students of color in the North End from Macdonough in order to satisfy the diversity requirements of the other elementary schools. These policies are undertaken at significant expense (particularly in the form of bussing) to maintain the funding base for other schools, even as Macdonough itself is underfunded and specifically threatened with closure.
Two assumptions are necessary for this system for the distribution of collective resources to maintain its normative legitimacy: that we live in a time of scarce resources, and that in this context only the management of society by economic principles will secure the general well-being. Both assumptions are directly contradicted by the history of redevelopment, where the massive investment of collective resources is ritually undertaken in a way that exclusively serves (White) middle class interests and displaces poor people, and most specifically poor people of color. This is because encoded directly in these economic principles is the idea that one’s position on the spectrum of economic achievement and social status is a result of the ability or inability to compete, and not the result of systemic and institutional regulatory mechanisms that are collectively produced. Meanwhile, the constant projection of deviance onto people with no/low-income, made possible by virtue of the (White) middle class hegemony over the representational apparatuses of the city government, the press, and other institutions, continually ensure that inequality is normatively perceived only in such a way as to “verify” the underlying economic principles themselves. The only way out of this conceptual impasse is a disruption of these economic principles by way of a disruption of the system of representation that supports their legitimacy.
Conclusion

I conclude this thesis with a discussion of the specific role that Wesleyan University has played in shaping transformations of the downtown in the past two decades. An ongoing controversy that must be considered as part of the larger history of redevelopment and displacement in Middletown has occasioned intense public debate over the course of the past year, revolving around the planned use of the former location of Green Street Art Center (GSAC). In her research on this project, Stephanie Campbell O’Brien argues that Wesleyan involvement in the formation of GSAC was premised on the desire to market a “competitive” image of excellence for the University and the surrounding community to prospective students and faculty.132 This goal was being more broadly pursued by supporting the development of Main Street and the North End in a project linking “attractiveness with dominant middle-class values and tastes,” requiring the “physical and symbolic middle-class reinvention” of the stigma projected onto the North End, activities understood by the University to be in “a symbiotic relationship” with the interests of the imagined beneficiaries of “improvement.”133 Wesleyan has thus maintained its historical institutional role of providing ideological and financial support for the shaping of the downtown around the figure of the middle-class White consumer.

O’Brien argues that this dynamic defined Wesleyan support for the GSAC, in the process constricting the center’s possibilities. Residents involved in the 1998 Yale Urban Design Workshop sought a practical and recreational community controlled

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center including adult education, job support, and other services as well as a place for community events and youth recreation: but under University leadership it became exclusively a youth arts education center under the banner of Wesleyan, according to O’Brien as less a community controlled center than the attempted “transfer of Wesleyan […] into North End space.” In spite of these problems, the GSAC came to be an important and valued resource to many in the North End, a sentiment widely expressed and recognized.

Wesleyan withdrew support for the center without formal warning in the summer of 2017, with President Roth citing the lack of available funds and the need for “a new model for supporting the community engagement of our students.” Nonetheless, before this announcement Roth had pushed for the move of the Wesleyan Bookstore from Broad Street to Main Street, a project that involved the total renovation of a 12,000 square foot two-story building at great expense. The school is currently converting a former Liberty Bank building to serve as administrative offices, also a no doubt expensive venture. Thus with its involvement in GSAC the University initially appropriated a demand coming from a very poor neighborhood for a community center, twisting this demand to fit a Wesleyan specific agenda, and subsequently abandoning this investment in favor of others that even further prioritized the inherently exclusionary project of Main Street as a middle class consumer zone, to be organized around Wesleyan students and employees.


134 O’Brien, “Middle-Class Middletown,” 27.

One other recently proposed project that President Roth has specifically promoted is the “Martin Luther King, Jr. Corridor” initiative, and on January 18th, 2019 he spoke at a public meeting in city hall about Middletown’s potential for participation in this statewide economic development program. No specific goals were defined for the project other than general “development” and “improvement” of the neighborhood between the Wesleyan campus and Main Street, specifically William Street, which he suggested should be re-designated as an extension of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Way, as a direct connection between Main Street and the President’s office on campus in honor of the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. In a pamphlet that was distributed at the meeting a large picture is included of MLK speaking at Wesleyan in the mid-1960s. At the time of King’s speech Wesleyan was collaborating with the city government to expand its properties and facilities east of High Street, in a move that made possible the continued redevelopment of the South End and displacement of the Black community there without a municipal legal requirement for a public referendum. This process would lead to the construction of the Wesleyan High Rise student apartment complex, as well as the construction of the adjacent Traverse Square federally subsidized housing complex. This was precisely the area to be assessed and “improved” by the MLK corridors initiative.

Although Roth was ostensibly speaking in support of Black communities in Middletown, his lack of awareness about this earlier legacy and its continuity within the present terms of conversation is total. The threat imagined to reside in Black neighborhoods as a whole in the 1950s and 1960s was the basis for the origins of Main Street in its present form, as “blight” designations facilitated the large-scale displacement of Black people and the assimilation of poor European immigrants into
the suburbs. The only difference observable in the present terms of discourse has been
the shift of emphasis discussed in Chapter 4. The bookstore move, the office building
acquisition, the MLK Corridors initiative, and the multitude of other investments
made by Wesleyan in the last several years all revolve around the idea that the best
thing for Wesleyan and all of Middletown is a “vibrant” Main Street; and this idea of
vibrancy is defined in opposition to the category of the non-jobholders and users of
social services, ubiquitously criminalized and constantly invoked as the inherent
threat to the “safety” of pedestrians (or at least their perceptions of safety and
experiences of comfort) and therefore to general economic prosperity. From this
rhetorical negation of humanity is generated the principle of low-income/“low-life”
status, and its effects are meted out into poor communities in part via the quotidian
and catastrophic varieties of displacement ritually enacted by Main Street
development.

This process has escalated under the leadership of President Roth, and the
most contentious public issue recently has been the future of the former GSAC
building in the aftermath of the decision to defund the center. The proposals made for
this building have been highly debated, in conversations that have most centrally
pitted advocates for a new community center against advocates for a new building to
hold the St. Vincent DePaul soup kitchen and housing facilities, currently located on
Main Street. The decision was ultimately in the hands of the city government,
particularly Mayor Drew as advised by the Planning and Zoning Commission and the
Economic Development Committee, and in spite of the fact that the issue had not
been publicly resolved to any extent, the decision has been made to approve the St.
Vincent move. As in the past, individuals in the city government, namely Mayor
Drew, have directly repressed efforts at genuine community inclusion in decision-making. Drew has pressured one elected official of the Economic Development Commission to recuse himself from debate, on the grounds that this official’s efforts to get direct, personal input from residents of the Green Street area were “highly unusual and inappropriate.” Such efforts have indeed been highly unusual in the long history of city planning in Middletown; the same cannot be said of Drew’s attempts to prohibit the people most effected by city planning decisions from being heard.

The consensus among the people I have interviewed is that the St. Vincent proposal was ultimately successful because it would fulfill the long-term goal (held by city officials and the leadership of Wesleyan) of removing the facility from Main Street, in order to make the area “safer” (more centrally perceivable as such) for pedestrian consumers, who are apparently deterred from Main Street by the lack of “vibrancy” associated with the soup kitchen. Even dissident city officials who have pushed for neighborhood inclusion endorse this perspective and its prescriptions. In her interview Cookie Quinones summarized the consequences of this view effectively, in reference to the way that the devaluation of human life represented by the constant push to remove social service organizations from Main Street is subsequently re-projected onto the entire area:

They want to push the low-income people out because they think, ‘we can’t get the good people because we got all of the bad people out on the streets!’ But you still claim that you’re helping [....] But how can you say that you want people who want a home, who want to have a good job, we want that too! Nobody wants to live in a dump, nobody wants to live in a car [....] So its like you say the door is open but you put your foot there, and you’re not

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letting us in. Because look right there, look at that beautiful building [Wharfside Commons]. Nobody wanted to move out, if it was ‘ok we’re going to relocate you and bring you back with low rents,’ well, fine, but they didn’t do that […] You think all these people can afford it? Why can’t the people that live here have a home at the same luxury as that one at a low-income for them. Why, why can’t they do that? They say, the economy.

From her perspective the categorization of people as “good” and “bad” based on income and implicitly race organizes the entire approach to managing Main Street, where the rhetorical negation of “the bad people out on the streets” constitutes the negation of the entire North End. It is this categorization that constantly determines the way that resources are distributed, therefore re-producing the very real financial insecurity that is necessary for the categorization in the first place. And the logic that informs this perspective imagines that this insecurity is not institutionally and systematically produced, but rather a function of the ostensibly natural/universal forces of “the economy,” in spite of the fact that abundant resources are always available for redevelopment projects that push to provide only for people whose needs are already satisfied.

Cookie Quinones’s perspective is matched by that of another person interviewed for this project, a musician from Middletown by the title of Emcee Elvee. From his point of view the St. Vincent proposal, as well intentioned as it no doubt was, had fundamentally succeeded because of its promise to remove the soup kitchen off of Main Street, a shared goal given priority by city officials and leaders of Wesleyan. He saw this as only the latest example of a decades long process by which the North End of Main Street had been transformed in order to make it “safer and more welcoming to Wesleyan students,” at the expense of people living in the area whose needs are never addressed. Elvee described this relationship and the power dynamics involved with a metaphor: “Its like the city is the parents, and Wesleyan is
this outside visitor; the ‘townies’ get treated like children, the city tells them ‘go to your room!’ and opens up the house to this other person who knocks at the door.” This description seems to aptly characterize the history of cooperation between the city government and Wesleyan, from the 1965 evasion of the public referendum, to the leveraging and subsequent withdrawal of Wesleyan funding as this foreclosed the possibility of a resident run community center on Green Street, to the ever-present influence of University priorities on the agenda of Main Street development.

In this context the constant distinction made by city officials between the city as a whole and residents of the North End, who are regularly described as an “overburden” on the ostensibly separate entity of the “taxpayers of Middletown,” comes into view as a blatant contradiction. Surely “taxpayers of Middletown” cannot refer to the people associated with Wesleyan, which is a non-profit, tax-exempt institution? In contrast, the vast and relatively untaxed resources of the University as constantly deployed on Main Street provide the opportunity for the city government to overwhelm and repress the political demands of its own subjects. It is therefore difficult to imagine an end to the historical pattern of displacement enacted by redevelopment in Middletown unless the legitimacy of the University and the overbearing influence it has on local issues is disrupted. This is not to suggest that there is some kind of inherent conflict of interest between the people associated with Wesleyan and the people who live in the downtown area. The conflict resides in the false presumption that the consumer-commerce obsessed vision of Main Street secures a general well being, and not a highly specific one; and the overrepresentation of this presumption is a central function that the University currently performs as a Middletown institution.
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