

**THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD:**  
*Slums, Social Uplift, and the Remaking of Wooster Square*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the mid twentieth century, New Haven underwent major transformations that continue to reverberate today. Highway construction aimed to entice businesses to the city and better connect cities with burgeoning suburbs; redevelopment officials hoped that urban renewal would be an opportunity to revitalize downtown areas and rid them of their so-called “slums.” A leader in the urban renewal movement, New Haven received more money per capita than any other city in the United States<sup>1</sup>, and under the leadership of Mayor Richard Lee, New Haven strove to become a model city for reformers across the nation. In time, urban renewal would become widely criticized; administrative technocrats were blamed for destroying entire neighborhoods in the service of ambitious plans that failed to work as expected, and Lee’s Redevelopment Agency was widely criticized for its failure to offer avenues for meaningful community participation, particularly that of the black community.

Within this context, Wooster Square is frequently held out as a success story – the one renewal project that did involve residents and help turn around a struggling area, making it one of the most desirable neighborhoods in the city. Yet more people were displaced from the Wooster Square in the fifties and sixties than from any other neighborhood in New Haven. As in other areas, hundreds of buildings were destroyed, and thousands of people were displaced. In light of these realities, why has Wooster Square been spared much of the criticism to which other urban renewal projects have been subject?

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Powledge, 163, MODEL CITY: A TEST OF AMERICAN LIBERALISM - ONE TOWN'S EFFORTS TO REBUILD ITSELF. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970.

In this paper, I identify three main reasons that mid-century redevelopment in Wooster Square is widely perceived as a successful urban renewal initiative. First, urban renewal efforts in Wooster Square engaged many middle- and lower-income homeowners, providing them with numerous resources and with an important rung on the ladder of social progress. The collaboration between the city and residents on the western side of the square began during the planning of what would become Interstate 91, and continue throughout the urban renewal period. Because the interests of these residents aligned with those of the Redevelopment Agency (RA), close collaborations formed easily, lending credence to the assertions that the RA was responsive to the desires of local residents even as poorer Italians, black people, and others who gave the neighborhood its unsavory reputation were left out. Second, residents who were displaced by the highways and by urban renewal efforts were generally poor and frequently rendered invisible by the process of their displacement. Whether they fled in advance of the next big change, were relocated to other poor areas or, in the case of the lucky ones, found preferable living situations elsewhere, those who left the neighborhood were no longer as able to share the other side of the story. As a result, those who remained in Wooster Square or moved to it as a result of its gentrification were primarily responsible for telling the story of the neighborhood's success. Finally, the RA made a concerted effort to make its successes in Wooster Square known, and the narratives put forward by supporters of urban renewal rarely included meaningful discussion of those who were pushed out of the neighborhood. The mass media, captivated by the story of a bad neighborhood that had made good, focused overwhelmingly on the poor quality of the housing pre-renewal, the involvement of local people in the planning and implementation of renewal projects in the area, and the beautiful architecture in the neighborhood. These treatments cemented a popular image of Wooster Square as the success story of the urban renewal period, even though it involved significant

displacement and disempowerment. Rather than an unmitigated success that avoided all of the missteps that befell other urban renewal projects in New Haven, urban renewal in Wooster Square is more properly understood as a complicated contest for the neighborhood's future, the story of which would be told by its winners.

## II. FROM GRAND TO WORKING CLASS: WOOSTER SQUARE'S FIRST CENTURY

The area that would come to be known as Wooster Square was first settled by wealthy Yankees in the early 1800s.<sup>2</sup> A short distance from New Haven's harbor, the neighborhood – then called the New Township – provided convenient access to the city's commercial ports. The landowners around Wooster Square were men of high standing, and they built many of the Victorian mansions<sup>3</sup> for which the neighborhood is known today. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Wooster Square had become one of the most fashionable areas in town.<sup>4</sup> But the neighborhood's splendor was destined to be short-lived. As the Civil War approached, New Haven's rail-based economy became increasingly important, wealthy industrialists flocked to the area, and the number of factories continued to grow.<sup>5</sup> Soon, "lifestyle wasn't grand anymore."<sup>6</sup> Growing numbers of immigrants made their way to New Haven, and in Wooster Square, the Yankees were replaced by incoming Irish, German, Swedish and Italian immigrants. Wooster Square became ever-more attractive to factory workers, and ever-less

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Hommann, 21. *WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN: A REPORT ON THE BACKGROUND, EXPERIENCE AND DESIGN PROCEDURES IN REDEVELOPMENT AND REHABILITATION IN AN URBAN RENEWAL PROJECT*. New Haven: The New Haven Redevelopment Agency, 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Gabrielle Brainard, 5. *Party Walls: Understanding Urban Change Through a Block of New Haven Row Houses, 1870-1979*, JOURNAL OF THE NEW HAVEN COLONY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Fall 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Powledge, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Brainard, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Lois Sabatino, *A Neighborhood That Wouldn't Give Up: Hey Hartford! Take a Look at Wooster Square*, HARTFORD COURANT, September 29, 1974.

attractive to their employers, most of whom abandoned the neighborhood by 1900.<sup>7</sup> The area became solidly working-class, and by 1920, the Court Street row houses – initially designed as single-family homes for small businessmen, managers and other members of the growing middle class<sup>8</sup> – had become rooming houses for working-class immigrants.<sup>9</sup>

Although Wooster Square initially attracted immigrants of a variety of nationalities, Italians steadily gained ground in the neighborhood. Uneducated peasants in Italy, Italian immigrants were initially confined to working in the least skilled, least profitable positions,<sup>10</sup> and living in the poorest areas in the city. Nonetheless, they made a vibrant life for themselves in Wooster Square. Comprising nearly a quarter of the neighborhood's population by the turn of the century,<sup>11</sup> Italians and Italian-Americans represented more than half of the area's residents by 1908. By 1920, such families comprised fully a quarter of the city's population,<sup>12</sup> and by 1930, they were over 80% of the population of Wooster Square.<sup>13</sup> Often called Little Naples or Little Italy, the neighborhood was an Italian stronghold, and in many ways a world unto its own. As one former resident reminisced, "Italian was not a second language: it was the first language ... children spoke Italian at home and English to survive in school."<sup>14</sup> Remarkably, by 1930, "fully fifty years after the immigration from Italy had begun in earnest, there were still eighty Italian ethnic societies in New Haven ... [and] there were innumerable social clubs for young men

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<sup>7</sup> Brainard, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Id., 7.

<sup>9</sup> Id., 9.

<sup>10</sup> Jerome K. Myers, *Assimilation to the Ecological and Social Systems of A Community*, 15 AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW, 367, 371-72 (June 1950).

<sup>11</sup> Powledge, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Lassonde, 20. LEARNING TO FORGET : SCHOOLING AND FAMILY LIFE IN NEW HAVEN'S WORKING CLASS, 1870-1940. Yale University Press, 2005. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 4 Apr. 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Id.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Ryan, *Neighborhood Has Flavor of Italy: Connecticut Crossroads*, THE HARTFORD COURANT, November 24, 1985.

that facilitated a larger sense of belonging to culturally distinct ways of life.”<sup>15</sup> Bakeries, pastry shops and meat markets catered to local tastes and cultural preferences. Babies were born at home, and the elderly often died at home, surrounded by family. The local community bank frequently “made personal loans based on family name and a handshake.”<sup>16</sup> Residents rarely needed to leave the neighborhood, instead working at factories within easy walking distance of their homes and leaving “their apartment windows open where the sounds of Italian music and delicious aromas from their kitchens drifted down to the street below.”<sup>17</sup>

A hotbed of manufacturing for decades, Wooster Square was hit hard by the Great Depression and various economic, social and policy trends that tore at the fabric of the vibrant neighborhood. When the economy soured, many factories struggled and eventually closed, leaving many Wooster Square residents unemployed and casting the neighborhood – the city’s most densely populated<sup>18</sup> – into greater poverty. By the early 1930s, seventy percent of families in the area earned less than \$1000, compared to forty percent of families citywide.<sup>19</sup> The growing popularity of cars pulled more middle- and upper-class city dwellers to the suburbs and further undermined the significance of the city as a site for industry.<sup>20</sup> The Depression caused housing prices to fall dramatically, placing them within reach of Italian-Americans who could buy them for cash and “putting most of the [area’s] property in the hands of the Italian community.”<sup>21</sup> At the same time, federal housing policies designed to stem the tide of mortgage defaults labeled Wooster Square and similar neighborhoods as mortgage risks, severely

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<sup>15</sup> Lasonde, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony V. Riccio, 350. *THE ITALIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN NEW HAVEN*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Riccio, 349.

<sup>18</sup> Lasonde, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Id., 21 (citing John B. Whitelaw, 118-19, *The Administration of the Elementary School as the Coordinating Social Factor in the Community* (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1935))

<sup>20</sup> Brainard, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Hommann, *WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN*, 17.

limiting access to capital in these areas. By the early 1930s, the median value of homes in Wooster Square was three thousand dollars below the city median of \$11,000.<sup>22</sup> When appraisers from the Home Owners' Loan Corporation descended on greater New Haven in 1937, Wooster Square became one of almost fifty neighborhoods identified as a credit risk,<sup>23</sup> and it received the lowest possible rating: a D.<sup>24</sup> D-rated neighborhoods were those "characterized by detrimental influences in pronounced degree, undesirable population or an infiltration of it" where "low percentage of home ownership, very poor maintenance and often vandalism prevail."<sup>25</sup> The HOLC's evaluation scheme included a number of considerations – including social status, homogeneity, and single-use development<sup>26</sup> – that doomed ethnically mixed, working-class places like Wooster Square to low evaluations. Wooster Square's mix of residential, industrial and retail uses, long accepted as a means of ensuring that workers would be near both to their jobs and to stores that could meet their day-to-day needs, was seen as detrimental.<sup>27</sup> Immigrant laborers who had supported New Haven's manufacturing economy in its boom time were stigmatized in its bust as "undesirable." With few resources available to maintain or restore homes in the neighborhood, Wooster Square continued to deteriorate. Even World War II failed to revive Wooster Square's flagging industrial economy, and by the 1950s, the area was one of the poorest in New Haven.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lassonde, 21 (citing Thelma A. Dreis, *A HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL STATISTICS OF NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936)

<sup>23</sup> Rae, Douglas, 264. *CITY: URBANISM AND ITS END*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Rae, 272 (citing estimates based on 1930 Census data from Wards 10, 11, 12 and 27, plus 30 percent of Ward 25 and 10 percent of Ward 14).

<sup>25</sup> Rae, 265 (citing Home Owners' Loan Corporation, *Residential Security Map and Explanation*, New Haven, Connecticut, October 1937).

<sup>26</sup> Rae, 266.

<sup>27</sup> Id.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, in 1950, ninety percent of households in Wooster Square had incomes less than the city's median. Brainard, 11.

### III. WEST AND BEST: REDIRECTING HIGHWAYS IN WOOSTER SQUARE

In its first hundred years, Wooster Square was transformed from an elite enclave to a thriving industrial district, and eventually to a poor and working-class area that had fallen on hard times. The next fifteen years would provide unprecedented opportunities to transform the neighborhood, and, in so doing, to uplift the status of the relatively small number of residents who collaborated with city officials to remake the neighborhood in their vision. Although many treatments of mid-century Wooster Square focus primarily, or even exclusively on urban renewal projects, highway plans that threatened to destroy the west “and best” part of the neighborhood helped to galvanize neighborhood leaders to action in the early 1950s, providing the first opportunity for residents of the west side to assert control over the future of Wooster Square. Working closely with city planners, these leaders – many of whom became involved with the Wooster Square Renewal Committee in the years that followed – were able to transform a plan that threatened to destroy the whole neighborhood into one that would preserve its western portion while razing and isolating poorer areas in the east.

In the early 1950s, the Connecticut State Highway Department began to plan for a northward extension of the Connecticut Turnpike through eastern New Haven. The highway was part of a broader plan to establish New Haven as “a gateway city, as an open door where highway traffic from Interstate 91 north and 95 south could conveniently enter by the newly constructed Oak Street Connector.”<sup>29</sup> As initially conceived, the plan for Wooster Square called for the new highway to lead north from the existing Turnpike along the western side of the neighborhood – a strategy that would have destroyed hundreds of homes, including the Court Street row

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<sup>29</sup> Riccio, 404.

houses. To state planners, shabby tenements and a small handful of nicer structures might well have seemed a small price to pay for progress. But many residents of Wooster Square strenuously objected to the destruction of what they believed was the finest part of neighborhood. Over the next several years, popular opposition to the state's designs mounted, and city officials – spurred by popular protest and led by William Celentano,<sup>30</sup> who had become the city's first Italian-American mayor in 1945 – repeatedly pressured the state highway department to alter the plan.

In the spring of 1950, city officials created a counter-proposal and presented its idea for a highway east of Wooster Square Park to the state highway department; they were met with resistance.<sup>31</sup> By the following year, the City had assembled data on family relocation and other costs associated with different versions of the plan and had a stronger case for its proposal, arguing that an eastern positioning would avoid destruction of the area's more refined homes, tie in better with major traffic arteries downtown, and clear more of the area's substandard housing.<sup>32</sup> Despite this input, when state highway engineers completed their study for the proposed highway in 1952, they remained committed to the western position.<sup>33</sup> Popular support for the City's plan continued to rise, and Wooster Square residents strongly objected that the Highway Department's plan "would bring Interstate 91 through the west (and best) side of the neighborhood."<sup>34</sup> Several members of the community lobbied city officials and "succeeded in persuading the City Planning Department to develop a general plan for the

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<sup>30</sup> Talbot, Albert, 108. *THE MAYOR'S GAME: RICHARD LEE OF NEW HAVEN AND THE POLITICS OF CHANGE*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1967.

<sup>31</sup> Hasbrouck, Sherman, 10-11. *Transformation: A Summary of New Haven's Development Program*. Report prepared for Masters of Urban Student Program at Yale. May 28, 1965 (revd December 1965).

<sup>32</sup> Id.

<sup>33</sup> Hommann, *WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Hasbrouck, 11.

area;<sup>35</sup> ultimately, the city planners' assessment put the total cost of the state highway plan at \$300,000 more than the City's proposal. By 1953, the state had adopted the City's proposed

alignment,<sup>36</sup> and construction began in 1956.<sup>37</sup>



**Proposed expressway network: comparison between alternate proposals.** “The State Highway Department Solution Tends to Depreciate This ... Further,” reads the caption, pointing to the area around the park.<sup>38</sup>

On its face, the adoption of the eastern positioning was an obvious choice. Many residents seemed to prefer it, city planners had rated the eastern position as the less costly highway plan, and separating the primarily industrial section in the east from the primarily residential section in the west also seemed like a worthy goal.<sup>39</sup> But the decision also had the effect of displacing hundreds of people in the

poorest section of the neighborhood, and of isolating many homes that fell on the wrong side of the line. Supporters of the plan underscored the destruction of “slum housing” as a benefit of the proposed alignment, not an unfortunate consequence of it. Although concerns about the quality of residential buildings on the eastern side were well-founded – many homes lacked private toilets, kitchens, and other basic necessities, and many had deteriorated as a result of years of divestment and neglect – highway construction became a tool to excise undesirable poor people as well as buildings. Residents who later came together as the Wooster Square Renewal Committee would stress the importance of finding ways to rehouse those displaced by

<sup>35</sup> *Citizen Participation In Urban Renewal*, 66 COLUMBIA LAW REVIEW 485, 543 (Mar., 1966).

<sup>36</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Hasbrouck, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Proposed Expressway Network Comparison Between Alternate Proposals. City of New Haven, ca. 1953. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>39</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 26.

the highway within Wooster Square, but those same residents opposed the construction of new public housing in the area,<sup>40</sup> and a concrete plan to address the needs of those displaced was not reached until 1958.<sup>41</sup> Even then, rehousing of residents posed significant challenges and was dependent on the efforts of the overwhelmed and under-resourced Relocation Office (see section VIII, “The Displaced,” *infra*).

The decision also placed the Farnam Courts public housing project – built little more than a decade before the plans for the highway were put in place – on the industrial side of the new expressway. Those in favor of the plan rationalized that locating the highway to the east of Farnam Courts “would have ... reduced [the size of the industrial park] to the point where it would have been useless.”<sup>42</sup> Public housing was, in its early years, neither as racially segregated nor as stigmatized as it would eventually become<sup>43</sup>, so it is possible that those favoring an eastern highway did not deliberately seek to cordon off the project but instead genuinely believed that “public housing tenants would be able simply to walk under the highway bridge” to reach the rest of the neighborhood.<sup>44</sup> But the fact that members of the Wooster Square Renewal Committee would, just a few years later, unanimously oppose the creation of any additional public housing in the area gives reason for pause. If more public housing seemed like too much, was it because the existing public housing *already* seemed like too much? Whether or

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<sup>40</sup> Report on Wooster Square Meeting, May 25, 1955. Richard Charles Lee Papers, Box 7, Folder 179: Correspondence – Wooster Square, 1955. Yale University.

<sup>41</sup> Relocation Plan of the New Haven Redevelopment Agency for the State of Connecticut Highway department in Connection with the Interstate 91 Highway Program under Section 13-112, Chapter 23h of the 1958 Revision of the Connecticut General Statutes, 1958. Alvin A. Mermin Papers, Box VIII, Folder C: Wooster Square Project. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>42</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Farnam Court’s early residents were mainly working-class white families, and through the mid-1960s, the project remained majority white. Because public housing was initially regarded as a stepping stone for working families, “little to no stigma attached itself to public housing in these early years.” Rae, 278.

<sup>44</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 29.

not it was intentional, the isolation of Farnam Courts would contribute to the project's significant decline in the decades to come.

While the motives of those supporting an eastern highway placement were likely mixed, the result was crystal clear: over the next decade, the construction of Interstate 91 would come to displace hundreds of residents unfortunate enough to fall in its path or on the “wrong side” of the road. Residents who were able to organize to protect their homes and interests succeeded in influencing the city and state's decision-making processes, but did so at the expense of neighbors whose presence was perceived as less valuable and less integral to the future of the community. As the first significant collaboration between the city and homeowners on Wooster Square's west side and a framework around which all subsequent decisions in the neighborhood would be made, the placement of I-91 is a critical part of the story of urban renewal in Wooster Square. (Indeed, the New Haven Redevelopment Agency would later describe the expressway as “the very heart of the renewal plan.”<sup>45</sup>) Nevertheless, the decision regarding the placement of Wooster Square's highway received minimal attention or active praise in many histories of the urban renewal period. For instance, *Wooster Square Design* (1965), a popular early history of this period written by Mary Hommann, the Director of the Wooster Square Project, uncritically approved of the project's goal of dividing “two completely diverse areas” and doing so with an elevated highway that “more satisfactorily separated the two divergent land uses from the visual standpoint.”<sup>46</sup> Although Hommann's “completely diverse areas” referred to the primarily residential uses of the west end and the primarily industrial uses of the east end, her description

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<sup>45</sup> Michael H. Carriere, 2010. *Between being and becoming: on architecture, student protest, and the aesthetics of liberalism in postwar America*. Thesis (Ph. D.), University of Chicago, 2010 (citing New Haven Redevelopment Agency, “Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan,” New Haven Redevelopment Agency records, Box 102, “Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan” folder, and New Haven Redevelopment Agency, “Traffic and Parking Factors in Wooster Square Renewal Area,” n.d., 2, New Haven Redevelopment Agency records, Box 101, “Part I, Final Project Report, Wooster Square (2 of 2)” folder).

rendered invisible the many homes situated east of the proposed expressway while altogether ignoring a third group: those in the path of the highway itself. Similarly, Fred Powledge's classic *Model City* (1970), while critical of other elements of urban renewal, lavished praise on the highway planning and emphasized its economic benefits, writing that, "An expressway, which often guarantees little more than a first-rate urban controversy, was used in Wooster Square to the neighborhood's advantage ... [I-91 served as] a buffer between the rehabilitated housing and the cleared industrial slums. The cleared land ... soon attracted more than \$11 million in private investments."<sup>47</sup> While the highway was indeed advantageous to those who lived to the west of it, its benefits were far from obvious to those who fell in its path. Howard Hallman, a longtime staff member of the New Haven Redevelopment Agency and one of the founders of Community Progress Inc,<sup>48</sup> included the story of Wooster Square in a 1970 collection focused on neighborhood control of public programs. Focusing only on the period from 1959-1965, Hallman began his telling of urban renewal by noting that, "Already the city planning commission and the state highway department had agreed upon an expressway to bisect the Wooster Square neighborhood, and this, combined with the deteriorated conditions, practically foreordained total clearance east of the highway."<sup>49</sup> By limiting his analysis to the period *after* highway decisions were made and glossing over the fate of the eastern section as "practically foreordained," Hallman obscured the role west-side homeowners in Wooster Square played in deciding the fate of their neighbors. But the role played by these actors had been a significant one. With the help of city officials, it was a role a small handful of Wooster Square's residents would continue to play for many years to come.

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<sup>47</sup> Powledge, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Noel A. Cazenave, 38. *THE URBAN RACIAL STATE: MANAGING RACE RELATIONS IN AMERICAN CITIES*. United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Howard Hallman, 167. *NEIGHBORHOOD CONTROL OF PUBLIC PROGRAMS: CASE STUDIES OF COMMUNITY CORPORATIONS AND NEIGHBORHOOD BOARDS*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970.

#### IV. NEXT UP: URBAN RENEWAL

The passage of the federal Housing Act of 1949 signaled a new era in New Haven: one in which “the elimination of sub-standard and other inadequate housing through the clearance of slums and blighted areas”<sup>50</sup> would take on paramount importance. Mayor Lee, the dynamic and controversial leader who unseated Mayor Celentano in the election of 1953, aggressively pursued urban renewal projects in an effort to transform New Haven into a model city. Consistent with the mandates of the original Act, the city’s earliest projects in Oak Street and the Church Street area involved extensive clearance. But a 1953 evaluation of federal Act would prompt a change in approach, both nationwide and in New Haven. Citing the extraordinarily high costs of demolishing and rebuilding city slums, mounting opposition to total clearance, and the logistical nightmares posed by massive relocation, the President’s Advisory Committee on Government Housing Policies and Programs recommended that the program be amended to allow cities to put federal funding toward rehabilitation of sub-standard housing, not only removal and rebuilding.<sup>51</sup> Congress adopted this approach in the Housing Act of 1954, opening a pipeline of federal funding for projects that would dramatically transform neighborhoods while leaving portions of their underlying structure intact.

Wooster Square became the first city in the nation to make use of the revised Housing Act’s support for rehabilitation.<sup>52</sup> Several key factors made it an ideal candidate for this form of urban renewal. The area was one of the poorest in New Haven, and struggled with numerous social ills. Nearly eight in ten adults in New Haven’s inner-city neighborhoods had never finished

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<sup>50</sup> Housing Act of 1949 (P.L. 81-171).

<sup>51</sup> *Citizen Participation In Urban Renewal*, 490.

<sup>52</sup> Powledge, 39.

high school.<sup>53</sup> The rates of unemployment and juvenile delinquency were nearly twice as high as those in other parts of the city.<sup>54</sup> Years of redlining had also taken their toll on Wooster Square; the Wooster Square Project Area included most of one of the areas the federal Home Owners' Loan Corporation had blacklisted for investment purposes years before.<sup>55</sup> Somewhat ironically, the new influx of federal renewal money was most needed in Wooster Square and other neighborhoods that had declined as the result of earlier federal policies that had cut these areas off from much-needed capital. At the same time, the neighborhood contained numerous buildings with long histories, interesting architectural details and essentially sound structures, making the area an ideal setting for rehabilitation. The highway renewal project had also helped to galvanize an organized group of residents committed to making change in their neighborhood, which made urban renewal seem like a natural next step.

### **A. An Alliance is Formed**

After the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, a group of Wooster Square residents, led by the pastor of a local church, began clean-up activities in the area<sup>56</sup> and started to discuss the possibility of applying for federal funding to restore the neighborhood to its former glory.<sup>57</sup> The group approached Mayor Celentano and the Yale University Planning Department with their ideas, and Yale made the Wooster Square area the subject of a thesis exercise for its

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<sup>53</sup> Murphy, Russell D, 17. *POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS AND URBAN POVERTY: THE STRATEGIES OF POLICY INNOVATION IN NEW HAVEN'S MODEL ANTI-POVERTY PROJECT*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath & Company, 1971 (citing numerous sources).

<sup>54</sup> Murphy, 17.

<sup>55</sup> Rae, 282 (citing estimates based on 1930 Census data from Wards 10, 11, 12 and 27, plus 30 percent of Ward 25 and 10 percent of Ward 14).

<sup>56</sup> Hallman, 167.

<sup>57</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Rev. Lawrence W. Doucette, 24).

students, one of whom would later be hired by the New Haven City Plan Commission to serve as the chief planner of the Wooster Square renewal project.<sup>58</sup> In May of 1955, the group then known as the Wooster Square Committee convened a meeting of roughly sixty residents to discuss the urban renewal program, and Mary Small, a community relations specialist with the city planning department, explained the contours of the federal housing program. The residents at the meeting agreed to request that the Commission designate Wooster Square as an urban renewal area and authorize enforcement of the local housing code to eliminate sub-standard conditions in the area,<sup>59</sup> and in June, the committee renamed itself the Wooster Square Neighborhood Renewal Committee.<sup>60</sup> This group provided a ready network of support for renewal in Wooster Square, greatly facilitating the planning of the project.

Mayor Lee was likely eager to spearhead urban renewal in Wooster Square in hopes of winning over the Italian voters he had long coveted. Although Italian immigrants “took significantly longer than the city’s other immigrant groups to assert their political will”<sup>61</sup> in New Haven, they rallied around Celentano when he became the first Italian to capture a major-party mayoral nomination in 1939.<sup>62</sup> Celentano lost that election by a small margin, but he carried over seventy percent of the votes in Wooster Square’s Tenth and Eleventh Wards.<sup>63</sup> That same year, the Board of Aldermen saw a rapid increase in the number of Italian GOP representatives,<sup>64</sup> and in the coming years, Celentano would bring thousands of Italians into

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<sup>58</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Report on Wooster Square Meeting, May 25, 1955. Richard Charles Lee Papers, Box 7, Folder 179: Correspondence – Wooster Square, 1955.

<sup>60</sup> Report on Wooster Square Meeting, June 30, 1955. Lee Papers, Box 7, Folder 179: Correspondence – Wooster Square, 1955.

<sup>61</sup> Stephen Lassonde, LEARNING TO FORGET : SCHOOLING AND FAMILY LIFE IN NEW HAVEN'S WORKING CLASS, 1870-1940, Yale University Press, 2005. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

<sup>62</sup> Rae, 292.

<sup>63</sup> Robert A. Dahl, 50-51. WHO GOVERNS? DEMOCRACY AND POWER IN AN AMERICAN CITY. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005 (second edition).

<sup>64</sup> Rae, 292.

the Republican Party, including many in Wooster Square.<sup>65</sup> Celentano was elected mayor in 1945 and defeated Richard Lee in both 1949 and 1951, in large part thanks to substantial margins of victory in Wooster Square.<sup>66</sup> Even though Lee finally bested Celentano in 1953, his popularity among Italians remained limited. Urban renewal offered the mayor an opportunity to win the affections of Italian voters in Wooster Square, and in particular the support of the homeowners who could cash in on the FHA-backed mortgages and other resources the renewal project promised. Collaborating with neighborhood leaders on local development became one of many strategies Lee would employ to win over Italian voters and break into Wooster Square's Republican stronghold.<sup>67</sup>

Over the next several years, Mary Small would meet with the Wooster Square Neighborhood Renewal Committee regularly, presenting tentative plans and allowing the committee to respond to the proposals.<sup>68</sup> Working under the aegis of the Redevelopment Agency,<sup>69</sup> the Committee initially included six representatives and eventually grew to 30-35 members.<sup>70</sup> By all accounts, the Committee had a considerable influence on the development of the renewal project and a positive, highly collaborative relationship with the Redevelopment Agency. For example, the Committee was opposed to the creation of either high-rise or public housing in the area, and consistent with this preference, only low-rise, middle-income cooperative units would ultimately be built.<sup>71</sup> From 1955-1958, the Committee met an incredible 62 times.<sup>72</sup> Mayor Lee and his staff were also intimately involved with Wooster Square residents during the planning

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<sup>65</sup> Rae, 293.

<sup>66</sup> Jerome K. Myers, 372. *Assimilation to the Ecological and Social Systems of A Community*, 15 AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW 367, 372 (June 1950).

<sup>67</sup> Other strategies included political appointments, patronage, and lucrative contracts. Dahl, 51.

<sup>68</sup> Hallman, 167.

<sup>69</sup> *Citizen Participation In Urban Renewal*, 543.

<sup>70</sup> Hasbrouck, 38.

<sup>71</sup> *Citizen Participation In Urban Renewal*, 543.

<sup>72</sup> Hallman, 167.

phases of the project and were highly responsive to concerns expressed by residents who lived around the square. For example, in 1955, the Redevelopment Agency agreed to pay for the costs of renovating a much-beloved statute of Christopher Columbus after locals objected to the appropriateness of residents paying for such a renovation themselves; this was done despite the fact that a neighborhood committee had already taken it upon itself to raise funds for the project.<sup>73</sup> Mayor Lee's right-hand man, Development Administrator Ed Logue, also got involved in the minute details of life in Wooster Square, urging the traffic department to take action after the Committee expressed concerns about a traffic light, parking and local speed limit: "Would you please give these matters your prompt attention since we are anxious to do all we can to prevent this neighborhood from deteriorating further during the interim while we are waiting for the final approval of the Wooster Square application."<sup>74</sup> When the Committee expressed concern about "bums" congregating on the square, Logue wrote to the chief of police to suggest having a Sunday morning patrol to get rid of them. "As you know," Logue wrote, "we are anxious to do all we can in this neighborhood during the interim period, and we must wait until the Federal government gives final approval to our renewal application..."<sup>75</sup> Time and again, Lee and the Redevelopment Agency intervened on what appeared to be small matters, committed to ensuring that the collaboration with residents in Wooster Square would be a success.

Given their intimate involvement in the planning phase and the City's degree of responsiveness to their concerns, it is no surprise that Committee members enthusiastically testified in favor of

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<sup>73</sup> Untitled document dated September 6, 1955. Lee Papers, Box 7, Folder 179, Correspondence: Wooster Square, 1955.

<sup>74</sup> Lee Papers, Box 12, Folder 329: Correspondence – Wooster Square, 1955.

<sup>75</sup> Id.

the plan when it was unveiled at a public hearing in mid-1958.<sup>76</sup> Later, committee members were also involved in the implementation of the plan. One of the core members of the Committee, Ted DeLauro, was later hired to serve as a neighborhood representative for the project.<sup>77</sup> He and other local leaders hired to work for the Redevelopment Agency actively reached out to the homeowners in the community, helping to explain the renewal project to them and encourage compliance with its provisions.

### **B. Who Was Left Out?**

Although the Committee played a key role in the development of Wooster Square's urban renewal initiative, there are many indications that the Committee reflected the values of only a small subset of the neighborhood's population. Specifically, it disproportionately reflected the interests of homeowners, excluded homeowners on the east side whose properties would later be demolished, included only longtime residents, and was ethnically homogeneous despite the community's growing black population.

In building relationships with the community, the City drew heavily on the contacts it had formed during the highway placement process: homeowners on the western side who were concerned about what they perceived as the decline of the neighborhood,<sup>78</sup> and their resulting inability to secure mortgage financing to improve their properties. The concerns voiced at one of the committee's earliest meetings reflect these concerns; most comments emphasized housing code enforcement to eliminate sub-standard conditions, the availability of new

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<sup>76</sup> Hallman, 167.

<sup>77</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 29.

<sup>78</sup> Hasbrouck, 39.

mortgages under the Federal Housing Administration, and “unanimous disapproval” of public housing projects.<sup>79</sup> As one member of the Committee would later explain at a 1958 public hearing on the plan, “I went to five different banks in one afternoon [to get a mortgage]. Some of them said they didn’t have any more applications when they heard that I bought a property on St. John Street. Well, before the day was over they ran out of applications and I ran out of banks.”<sup>80</sup> Homeowners were eager to bring urban renewal to Wooster Square because Section 220 of the National Housing Act would enable them to apply for federally-insured private mortgages to finance any repairs necessary to bring their homes into alignment with property rehabilitation standards.<sup>81</sup> This program was an obvious boon to homeowners who had been redlined for years; it was also in direct opposition to the needs of tenants and roomers who would be pushed out as rehabilitation efforts got underway. Although the Committee did not consist entirely of homeowners – of twenty-five core members, fifteen were resident property owners, and several more lived in property owned by their relatives<sup>82</sup> – it disproportionately reflected the interests of the property owners for whom urban renewal would serve as a windfall.

Even within the category of homeowners, the Committee failed to represent the interests of all those included within the renewal area. Critics of the plan would later note that “the people who live in the western half of the neighborhood [formed the Committee because they] were

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<sup>79</sup> Report on Wooster Square Meeting, May 25, 1955. Lee Papers, Box 7, Folder 179: Correspondence – Wooster Square, 1955.

<sup>80</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Thomas Verderame, member of WSRC, 37).

<sup>81</sup> "Citizen Participation In Urban Renewal," 497.

<sup>82</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Louis Longobardi, 87).

aware of the threat to their homes and investments,”<sup>83</sup> and then approved plans for the city to either purchase or condemn property east of the new highway route without consulting east side property owners. But “no special effort was made to make [the Committee] broadly representative,” and “no by-laws or election procedures were set up...”<sup>84</sup> While the group included residents of almost every rehabilitation block,<sup>85</sup> no residents of the future clearance area – whether homeowners or tenants – were involved.<sup>86</sup> Nearly all of the committee members were lifelong residents of the neighborhood, and more recent arrivals to the neighborhood were left out.<sup>87</sup> No effort was made to represent the community's poorer elements, or to broaden the Committee beyond its initial membership.<sup>88</sup>

The Wooster Square Renewal Committee was also almost entirely Italian,<sup>89</sup> despite the growing number of black residents in the neighborhood. During the 1950s, the number of black people in New Haven more than doubled, the result of both natural increase and of immigration, including from the rural South.<sup>90</sup> Much of this growth was concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods, including Wooster Square.<sup>91</sup> Although Wooster Square remained majority Italian, by 1960, almost a quarter of the neighborhood's population was black.<sup>92</sup> Many black people in the neighborhood – some 2,000 by the time redevelopment began in the early 1960s –

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<sup>83</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Charles DeMuis, 78, reading from minutes of the June 30, 1958 meeting).

<sup>84</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 24.

<sup>85</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 24.

<sup>86</sup> Hallman, 167.

<sup>87</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Theodore DeLauro, 72-73).

<sup>88</sup> *Citizen Participation In Urban Renewal*, 543.

<sup>89</sup> Hallman, 167.

<sup>90</sup> Murphy, 17 (citing Community Progress, Inc., 6-7, *New Haven Youth Development Program*, New Haven: Community Progress, Inc.).

<sup>91</sup> Id.

<sup>92</sup> Murphy, 18.

were concentrated in the most dilapidated areas, particularly on the eastern side<sup>93</sup> and in the area north of Grand Avenue. Just as Italians and other immigrants had done in the decades before, black people moved to New Haven in search of economic opportunity, but in their case, “the timing couldn't have been worse. Just as blacks began arriving in numbers ... those factory wage dollars were disappearing from central city New Haven...”<sup>94</sup> With few other affordable options, hundreds of families displaced by the Oak Street project – many of them black families – moved to the poorest sections of Wooster Square,<sup>95</sup> heightening fears that without swift action Wooster Square would soon become an unsalvageable slum. Although Wooster Square’s decline had begun long before black people became a significant presence in the neighborhood, many Italian residents of Wooster Square blamed the influx of black residents for the decline and saw urban renewal as a means of removing black people<sup>96</sup> – a necessary step to save the area from the harsh fate that had befallen Oak Street. Pleas to consider the needs of the city’s growing black population frequently fell on deaf ears. As one democratic alderman described, “Wherever there are large groups of white citizens of immigrant extraction one argument against the civil rights movement ... recurs incessantly. ‘Nobody helped us’ ... ‘We Italians had to work our own way up – why can’t they?’ ... In New Haven’s struggles this argument must have been used, by conservative estimate, eighty-seven thousand times.”<sup>97</sup> The sense that black people did not deserve a leg-up hardened the sympathies of many Italian-Americans in Wooster Square, even as they pursued government support for themselves.

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<sup>93</sup> Normal I. Fainstein, Normal I. & Susan S. Fainstein, 45, *New Haven: The Limits of the Local State*, in *RESTRUCTURING THE CITY: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF URBAN REDEVELOPMENT*, New York: Longman, 1986 (citing data from the New Haven Redevelopment Agency and *RELOCATING FAMILIES*).

<sup>94</sup> Rae, 258.

<sup>95</sup> Fainstein & Fainstein, 41.

<sup>96</sup> Talbot, 137-8.

<sup>97</sup> William Lee Miller, 99. *THE FIFTEENTH WARD AND THE GREAT SOCIETY: AN ENCOUNTER WITH A MODERN CITY*. Boston: William Lee Miller, 1966.

Many Italian homeowners in Wooster Square likely saw urban renewal as an opportunity to improve their social and economic status. According to Robert Dahl in his classic *Who Governs?*, ethnic groups pass through three stages on the way to political assimilation. In the first stage, they are working-class, unskilled laborers “low in status, income and influence.”<sup>98</sup> In the second stage, many group members remain working-class, but others begin to access white-collar jobs, higher levels of wealth, more social standing, and greater political clout. Ethnic group members begin to challenge and unseat incumbents, entering the political arena.<sup>99</sup> Working class and middle-income Italian homeowners in Wooster Square may have seen the project as a chance to enter Dahl’s third stage, in which, “Large segments are assimilated into the middling and upper strata; they have middle-class jobs, accept middle-class ideas, adopt a middle-class style of live, live in middle-class neighborhoods...”<sup>100</sup> Even though Italians had become increasingly mobile and influential within New Haven and just 45% of them lived in Wooster Square by 1940, their over-representation in the struggling neighborhood had led Italians to be “identified with this slum area, and ... [thought to possess] the undesirable characteristics of slum dwellers.”<sup>101</sup> For some Italians, breaking into the upper class had required moving away from heavily Italian neighborhoods and into less ethnically identifiable areas.<sup>102</sup> During the urban renewal period, struggling homeowners could instead use city support and federal funding to transform Wooster Square itself into the “right kind” of neighborhood and in the process lift themselves up to the middle class.

Both the City and the members of the Wooster Square Renewal Committee looked to the past as a model for what they hoped lay ahead in the future. Residents longed to see the

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<sup>98</sup> Dahl, 34.

<sup>99</sup> Dahl, 35.

<sup>100</sup> Dahl, 34.

<sup>101</sup> Myers, 372.

<sup>102</sup> Id.

neighborhood “redeveloped into a fine residential section, as it used to be.”<sup>103</sup> On its part, the City had “long been aware of the desirability of preserving and restoring this area to its original condition.”<sup>104</sup> The Wooster Square represented by stately Victorian homes once occupied by the city’s elite became the touchstone for reformers who sought to recapture the area’s “original,” if short-lived, glory. Thus, “Pervasive agency control in ... Wooster Square [was] not the result of deliberate machinations by the Redevelopment Agency, but occur[ed] because citizens groups, from their inception, [were] so identified with agency renewal goals that effective resistance to what might be major defects in a plan [was] unlikely.”<sup>105</sup> Coalescing around the goal of restoring the area to its former splendor, the City and the Committee worked hand in hand to make their vision of the neighborhood a reality.

## V. THE PLAN FOR WOOSTER SQUARE

*One point I would like to make absolutely clear: this is not a wholesale clearance program... What can be finer than a united neighborhood, a united community working hand in glove toward one common goal – the first slumless American city?*<sup>106</sup>

Urban renewal in Wooster Square was seen by many as a preventative measure: a set of dramatic interventions that could help save the neighborhood from a terrible future. Unlike the Oak Street area, which many regarded as an unsalvageable slum at the time it was targeted for clearance, Wooster Square was seen as a neighborhood that had begun to decline but was still in decent shape. When conversations about urban renewal in Wooster Square began, many homeowners had already begun extensive remodeling on their own, and demand for rental

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<sup>103</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Rev. Lawrence W. Doucette, 24).

<sup>104</sup> Redevelopment Agency Annual Report, 1955, 6. New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Box 103.

<sup>105</sup> *Citizen Participation In Urban Renewal*, 545.

<sup>106</sup> Remarks of Mayor Lee: Announcement of Loan and Grant for Wooster Square Project. June 7, 1958. Lee Papers, Box 18, Folder 450.

units in the area was high.<sup>107</sup> As the Renewal Committee observed in a 1955 meeting, “Such a demand seems to indicate that Wooster Square is still a good place to live and with the Urban Renewal program it will become an even more desirable residential area.”<sup>108</sup> Later on, a pamphlet describing the urban renewal project noted that the prospect of decline “may not be apparent because Wooster Square is in many ways still a pleasant place to live – within easy

## OUR NEIGHBORHOOD IS IN DANGER

In 1820 the Wooster Square neighborhood became New Haven's first suburb. With its pleasant park and fine homes overlooking the harbor, it was soon a fashionable summer resort. But by 1860 the neighborhood had begun to change. Factories were built on the vacant land beyond the ring of fine homes around the Square. Thus New Haven's first industrial district developed and became the “Detroit” of the carriage industry. Mixed with these factories were tenements and quickly-built homes to house the factory workers. Today these rundown, overcrowded homes and antiquated factories are an ever increasing danger to their occupants and to the neighborhood. In 17 years, 35 people have lost their lives in fires in this section – 25 in factory fires, 10 in tenement fires. This is a fearfully high price to pay. We cannot afford it.

Other dangers that threaten to destroy the Wooster Square neighborhood and make it New Haven's largest slum in 10 years or less:

- 512 substandard residential buildings
- 336 rat infested dwellings
- 12 houses condemned in one year
- 3 obsolete public schools
- 481 traffic accidents in 1956
- 375 fire calls in one year
- 137 antiquated factory structures – only 15 are satisfactory
- 218 commercial buildings – only 38 are satisfactory
- Congestion caused by trucks and thru traffic
- Not enough off-street parking
- No facility for adult recreation
- Mortgage money very hard to get
- Poor street pattern

The neighborhood cannot survive in the face of these conditions. In spite of the many things for which the neighborhood is famous including the spirit of community pride and loyalty of its residents as well as its

**Specter of the slums.** Residents were warned that swift action was needed to prevent Wooster Square from becoming “New Haven's largest slum in 10 years or less.”<sup>109</sup>

walking distance of Downtown, with a lovely park, many fine old homes, churches, and schools...”<sup>110</sup>

But the Redevelopment Agency, Renewal Committee and other supporters of urban renewal urged the public not to be lulled into complacency by the virtues of the neighborhood as it was. Instead, they stressed the neighborhood's gradual decline, particularly in the postwar years, and pointed to the growing number of industrial uses as a threat to the residential character of the neighborhood.<sup>111</sup> “Our Neighborhood is in Danger,” cautioned one pamphlet, resorting to images of death and destruction to get its point across:

<sup>107</sup> As an example, one homeowner on the Renewal Committee reported receiving over 100 calls from people interested in renting one of his apartments. Wooster Square Neighborhood Renewal Committee Meeting, June 30, 1955. Lee Papers. MS 318, Series I, Box 7, Folder 179: Correspondence – Wooster Square, 1955.

<sup>108</sup> Wooster Square Neighborhood Renewal Committee Meeting, June 30, 1955. Lee Papers, Box 7, Folder 179,: Correspondence – Wooster Square, 1955.

<sup>109</sup> “Our Neighborhood Is in Danger.”

<sup>110</sup> “Our Neighborhood Is in Danger.” Informational pamphlet of the Wooster Square Renewal Committee and the New Haven Redevelopment Agency. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>111</sup> July 7, 1955 letter from acting RA Chair to Board of Aldermen, 3. New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, MS 1814, Series I, Box 103.

In 17 years, 35 people have lost their lives in fires in this section... This is a fearfully high price to pay. We cannot afford it. Other dangers... threaten to destroy the Wooster Square neighborhood and make it New Haven's largest slum in 10 years or less... The neighborhood cannot survive in the face of these conditions... All these fine things will be lost unless – the bad influences are eliminated.<sup>112</sup>

The Redevelopment Agency and Renewal Committee stressed that there was no time to lose: “Experience in the Oak Street area has shown that if these trends are not halted the area will become a slum with clearance as the only remedy. There is hope for a better fate for Wooster Square, if the city and the people act promptly.”<sup>113</sup>

The plan for urban renewal in Wooster Square involved a multitude of strategies.

Rehabilitation would aim to bring homes into compliance with housing code requirements and restore their lost beauty; clearance would rid the area of dilapidated homes. A new school and community center would be established to replace several older schools that then served the neighborhood. East of the new highway route, a commercial-industrial park would be established, replacing run-down factories with more modern facilities and leaving room for new industry to develop.<sup>114</sup> The plan also aimed to create a limited amount of low- and moderate-income housing. The ambitious proposal aimed to put everything in its place, segregating the hodgepodge of industrial, commercial and residential facilities into orderly areas separated by the new highway.<sup>115</sup> The federal government would provide two thirds of the total project costs – over \$24 million<sup>116</sup> to acquire properties to be torn down and to cover other project

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<sup>112</sup> “Our Neighborhood Is in Danger.”

<sup>113</sup> July 7, 1955 letter from acting RA Chair to Board of Aldermen, 3. New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, MS 1814, Series I, Box 103.

<sup>114</sup> Talbot, 137.

<sup>115</sup> “Background Report: Wooster Square Renewal Project,” 1958. Mermin Papers, Box VIII, Folder C: Wooster Square Project. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>116</sup> Id.

costs. Under the terms of the Housing Act, the city was obliged to cover the remaining third of the project costs, but New Haven would not spend any of its own cash on the project, instead receiving some credit for capital improvements and financing the remainder of its share with State aid.<sup>117</sup>

The plan called for the clearance of 517 out of 903 residential structures in the project area; the buildings slated for destruction contained 1563 dwelling units.<sup>118</sup> The Redevelopment Agency justified this radical decision in two ways. First, the Agency issued findings that a significant portion of the units to be destroyed were substandard.<sup>119</sup> Citing the high rate of fires, arrests,<sup>120</sup> and other vices in the project area, the Agency asserted that clearance was needed to protect those who lived in substandard housing and their neighbors. The Agency also justified the high degree of housing clearance as a necessary component of its overall strategy of establishing order in the project area. Stemming the tide of deterioration was deemed to be so important that even eliminating housing that was *not* substandard was “specifically found [by the Agency] to be essential to complete an adequate unit of development and the Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Area as a whole is hereby found to be deteriorated, substandard and detrimental.”<sup>121</sup> Declaring the entire area to be substandard empowered the Redevelopment Agency to make liberal use of its power of eminent domain. Establishing orderly distinctions between different parts of the project area was the overriding concern; if some perfectly sound structures had to be destroyed in the process, so be it.

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<sup>117</sup> Id.

<sup>118</sup> “Declaration of Findings and Resolutions of the New Haven Redevelopment Agency Approving the Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan, Conn. R-1” (June 25 1958), 7. New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Box 103.

<sup>119</sup> A random survey of 360 of the 1563 ultimately slated for clearance found that 321 units failed to meet the standards for adequacy established by the American Public Health Association. Id.

<sup>120</sup> The Redevelopment Agency found that between 1948 and 1957, roughly a third of the City’s fires occurred in the area; from 1952-1957, 30,247 of 104,109 arrests citywide occurred there. Id.

<sup>121</sup> Id., 5.

After considerable back and forth between the Redevelopment Agency and the Wooster Square Renewal Committee, the plan for the area was finally in place. All that remained was to share it with the residents whose lives would soon be upended.

## VI. PUBLIC HEARING IN 1958

*It is unfortunate some people have to get hurt, to carry on progress. As you say, some are on the other side of the stew, or the track ... If they want to improve the neighborhood, if I have to be relocated, all well and good... we are sorry but somebody has got to get hurt ... maybe I will meet some of your people on the street and maybe you will snub me and say, 'Because your house isn't going down,' and so forth. But I have the guts ... Let's face it ... it is for our benefit.<sup>122</sup>*

*Amidst the chorus of praise for this beneficent project there have been sounded a few discordant notes, not powerful, but significant nonetheless, a small voice from the little people who are afraid that they will be gobbled up and left high and dry.<sup>123</sup>*

During the summer of 1958, the Redevelopment Agency and the Aldermanic Committee hosted two significant public forums to discuss the plan for the Wooster Square Project Area. Many of the major histories of this period fail to mention these meetings,<sup>124</sup> even treatments that go into detail about the relationship between the Renewal Committee and city planners<sup>125</sup> or other dynamics around the process of approving the renewal plan.<sup>126</sup> One of the few accounts that does allude to these hearings does so only to mention that members of the Renewal Committee “gave enthusiastic support” for the plan they had helped to create.<sup>127</sup> The Redevelopment Agency’s 1965 book on urban renewal in Wooster Square focused on the testimony of members of the Wooster Square Renewal Committee, writing that “the committee sent representatives

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<sup>122</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing At City Hall* (New Haven, June 30, 1958) (statement of Carmen Aitro, 81-84).

<sup>123</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Rev. Lawrence W. Doucette, 26).

<sup>124</sup> See, e.g., Rae.

<sup>125</sup> See e.g. Hommann.

<sup>126</sup> See e.g. Powledge, 41 (describing Mayor Lee’s strategic move to gain aldermanic approval of the plan in 1959, an election year).

<sup>127</sup> Hallman, 167.

[to the 1958 hearings] to speak eloquently in favor of the plan’s adoption” and enumerating many of the other groups who supported the plan.<sup>128</sup> This is true, but it is only part of the story. Transcripts of these two meetings reveal that in the weeks before it was approved, the plan for Wooster Square remained a deeply contentious issue in the community – one that reflected a complicated mixture of good intentions, fear, competing values, and misunderstandings. Many residents, particularly those on the east side, felt that the plan was rushed, not transparent, and not mindful of the needs of residents soon to be displaced. Though the plan in Wooster Square was subsequently lauded as having been the product of widespread community involvement and support, the discussion at the 1958 public hearings makes plain that critical interests were left out both in the decision-making process and in many histories that would later laud those processes.

At the 1958 meeting, supporters of the Wooster Square renewal plan displayed the uncomfortable mixture of concern for and fear of poor people common to many proponents of urban renewal. The testimony of Michael Zito, a member of the Renewal Committee and a foreman at the Sargent Company, serves as an example of this tension. Referencing that his own home had “all the modern conveniences,” he related his surprise and dismay at the conditions he encountered when he visited the homes of his employees: “believe me, the filth that I saw in some of the areas, in the houses, and the rundown conditions, and the people, how they live there is beyond me.”<sup>129</sup> The pastor of a church on Grand Avenue also spoke out in support of the plan, denouncing the inhuman conditions of many homes in the neighborhood and asking that the City do better by its people:

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<sup>128</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 29.

<sup>129</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Michael Zito, 20–21).

I have been nauseated at the terrible conditions under which some people have been forced to live ... places fit for two or three families to live in now inhabited by Lord knows how many people ... vermin creeping on the walls, children being brought up in such circumstances. It is a terrible experience. However, in the midst of this very neighborhood we have wonderful people ... They are excellent people, boys and girls growing up in the midst of such conditions, nevertheless leading virtuous, good, holy lives, fathers and mothers raising fine families ... conditions are such that certainly a long time ago something should have been done about it.<sup>130</sup>

Like many others, the pastor supported urban renewal because he believed that it could help improve living conditions that seemed, to him, intolerably and unforgivably bad.

Although some had good intentions toward the people who stood to be displaced by the project, many proponents of the Wooster Square plan were also plainly motivated by fear. Many of the statements focused on the specter of the slums, suggesting that disease from the slums could spread elsewhere and that the slums *themselves* were a disease that would harm Wooster Square if not inoculated right away. At the June 1958 hearing, New Haven's Director of Public Health spoke in favor of the plan, noting that,

Federal records show that on a nation-wide basis, slums are directly involved in 60% of all tuberculosis cases and 50% of all diseases. And of course, disease cannot be contained in any one neighborhood. It spreads from poor housing, to good housing. Thus, every citizen of New Haven, no matter where he lives, is directly threatened by the existence of slums and the diseases they spread ... Not only is this the tool to eliminate areas of high disease frequency – but it is the tool to eliminate areas from which disease spreads through an entire community.<sup>131</sup>

A representative of the Council of Social Agencies argued that slum clearance was needed to help preserve the quality of the Farnam Courts project because “the slums ... move out and

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<sup>130</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing At City Hall* (New Haven, June 30, 1958) (statement of Reverend Michael McVerry, 79-80).

<sup>131</sup> Statement of Dr. Clement F. Batelli, Director of Public Health. New Haven Redevelopment Agency hearing, June 30, 1958. Lee Papers, Box 18, Folder 450.

creep in and infect everything they come in contact with.”<sup>132</sup> The encroachment of industrial uses in primarily residential areas was also described like a dangerous sickness, “a cancerous growth” that would destroy the neighborhood if not halted soon.<sup>133</sup> In these and similar comments, supporters of the plan spoke as though slums and storefronts had taken on a lives of their own and actively were threatening to strangle everything else.

Some longtime residents laid the blame for the neighborhood’s decline directly on new renters and those who let them in. One Italian man who had lived in the area for more than forty years criticized absentee landlords who had no investment in maintaining their properties or renting only to appropriate tenants. “Three families in one, two families in one... It is really a mess,” he complained.”<sup>134</sup> Noting that she too had come from a big family, she stressed that the *quality* of family was not what it had been in the past. “We were well behaved. Today the parents say, if the kid makes a hole in the wall, ‘You mustn’t cry. You can knock it down.’ They don’t care, because they don’t have to pay for the buildings.”<sup>135</sup> Similarly, another homeowner stressed that the value of his home had declined because the area was deteriorating, a phenomenon he also seemed to blame on the area’s newcomers. “Would you live in the area with these people?” he asked, challenging supporters of the plan. “Would you share favors with each other? No.”<sup>136</sup>

Although Wooster Square remained majority-Italian in the late 1950s, the stream of newcomers from the Oak Street area and elsewhere had begun to shift Wooster Square’s

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<sup>132</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Frank Harris, 62).

<sup>133</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Alphonse S. DiBenedetto, Chairman of the Redevelopment Committee of the Republican Watchdog Committee, 51).

<sup>134</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing At City Hall* (New Haven, June 30, 1958) (statement of Carmen Aitro, 82).

<sup>135</sup> *Id.*

<sup>136</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Carmen Aitro, 38).

demographics significantly, and it is clear that many of those who supported renewal did so in part because of their discomfort with “these people” moving in.

Those who supported the plan emphasized that time was of the essence. One longtime resident and Renewal Committee member urged that, “If something isn’t done in the very near future – and I daresay we should not wait too long – blight and slums will be on our back doorsteps within a year or two.”<sup>137</sup> Mayor Lee put the decision in dramatic terms, insisting that, “the time for delay and the time for waiting is long past. It is later than we think in our community. I believe that we have reached the point of no return.”<sup>138</sup> Emphasizing the need to shore up New Haven’s dwindling tax base, Lee also raised the specter of lives lost in fires as a way to arouse the passions of the crowd. “I would like to remind everybody of the lives that were lost in the Wooster Square area in the last fifteen years,” he said gravely. “As far as I am concerned, if by speeding up this program and getting it underway we save one life, then this program is a success.”<sup>139</sup>

Despite the many statements in favor of the plan – a great many of which were made by members of the Renewal Committee or by representatives from various city agencies – serious objections were also lodged. Some critics noted that the proponents of the plan had repeatedly emphasized health hazards, rat infestations, fires, and other problems in the “slum” areas, but that these could be solved “with competent, capable, police and fire departments, and before the City resorts to the extravagance of redevelopment” and that the city should “not wait[] upon

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<sup>137</sup> Id. (statement of James Lambert, 22).

<sup>138</sup> Id. (statement of Mayor Richard Lee, 18-19).

<sup>139</sup> Id.

this project before it attends to the rodent problem.”<sup>140</sup> Though the renewal area did face its problems, redevelopment was not necessarily the answer to them; “the administration should deliver the services of its office, instead of proposed redevelopment schemes, professional publicity releases, and elegant brochures as it insists upon redevelopment as a panacea for all ills of the City.”<sup>141</sup>

Many people urged the city not to rush into anything before working out the details, particularly given the many urban renewal projects that were already underway. One longtime alderman cautioned, “when a city undertakes projects of the magnitude of Oak Street, Church Street, and now Wooster Square, all within a short period of time, somewhere along the line one should pause and take stock of what has occurred to the other before attempting new ones.”<sup>142</sup> He pointed out that the projected timeline for the Oak Street project had been incorrect, and that land purchases and reconstruction projects had barely begun;<sup>143</sup> the same could happen in Wooster Square. Another opponent of the plan was even more pointed in his criticism:

How much is it going to cost the people to move back into the area? Who is going to build [new housing units]? What are the details concerning those things? Don’t you think we ought to know when you are going to displace ‘x’ number of people? Are they going to be able to move back here? I don’t know, and neither does anybody else.<sup>144</sup>

A member of the first Redevelopment Commission in New Haven also expressed concern that despite the fact that the City had been studying the Wooster Square area as a potential site for

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<sup>140</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Charles Tomasino, State Representative from the City of New Haven to the Connecticut General Assembly, 93).

<sup>141</sup> *Id.* (statement of Charles Tomasino, 94).

<sup>142</sup> *Id.* (statement of Henry J. DeVita, 43).

<sup>143</sup> *Id.*

<sup>144</sup> *Id.* (statement of Maxwell A. Alderman, 86).

renewal since 1951, fully seven years later, “only a chosen few seem to be in full possession of the facts. The general public... [is] not fully informed as to the measuring rod used ... to determine that Wooster Square is to be redeveloped.”<sup>145</sup> With more questions than answers, many of those who testified at these meetings seemed skeptical of the determination that their area needed a complete overhaul.

Several objectors expressed special concern about the problem of rehousing residents displaced by the renewal project. A retired engineer underscored that it was wrong “to stampede these people out of their homes before you give them a place to go. The federal government didn’t give you this money to knock down property,” he chastised. “They gave you money to develop slums, low rent conditions, low rent housing for our people.”<sup>146</sup> A reverend whose parishioners had been uprooted by a previous urban renewal project spoke powerfully about the importance of looking out for the poor. Residents had approached him “with downcast minds and bleeding hearts. They had to move, and the rents available were beyond their means. They had been happy and able to get along in their former rents, which had been condemned.”<sup>147</sup> Urging the Redevelopment Agency to learn from its mistakes, he added, “I trust that it will not fail that this time the poor ... will not curse, rather will they bless the authorities for having done their best to transplant them to another rent or location where they will still be able to make both ends meet.”<sup>148</sup> Other objectors noted that even if new housing were built in Wooster Square,

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<sup>145</sup> Id. (statement of Maxwell A. Alderman, 81).

<sup>146</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing At City Hall* (New Haven, June 30, 1958) (statement of Rudolph Carloni, 60).

<sup>147</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Rev. Lawrence W. Doucette, 27).

<sup>148</sup> Id.

there were no guarantees that those displaced would be able to afford to return; many in Oak Street had not.<sup>149</sup>

Longtime residents poised to be displaced were angry that the plans had not taken their needs into account. “Redevelopment, the theory is very good. But ... they haven’t approached the people who have been living in that neighborhood for forty, fifty, sixty years, spent a lifetime down there,” one explained. People had “worked hard for that ‘dump’ that we are living in down there ... it is our home.”<sup>150</sup> Noting that the Renewal Committee was disproportionately homeowners on the western side, an east side homeowner argued that the plan was “grossly unfair to the property owners who were not invited to attend any of these meetings. After all, they are the ones who are being put out. They are the ones whose homes and property are being taken from them.”<sup>151</sup> Though the members of the Renewal Committee strongly identified with the goals of the renewal plan, that feeling was far from universal. “Whom does the city belong to, the Redevelopment Commission, or to the people who have homes and property, the people who live and work here?” one objector asked.<sup>152</sup>

One critic noted that a single committee of fewer than thirty members and average attendance of fifteen was far from enough to serve all of the people the community.<sup>153</sup> Given how unrepresentative the committee had been, those who opposed the plan were frustrated that it seemed like a done deal by the time of the public hearing:

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<sup>149</sup> Id. (statement of Alphonse S. DiBenedetto, 51).

<sup>150</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing At City Hall* (New Haven, June 30, 1958) (statement of Mattie Amuro, homeowner, 208 Greene St, 57-8).

<sup>151</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Charles DeMuisis, 78).

<sup>152</sup> Id. (statement of Charles DeMuisis, 79).

<sup>153</sup> Id. (Maxwell A. Alderman, 87).

This beautiful brochure says, ‘A Message to the people of Wooster Square. Three long, hard years of planning are over. The plan is now ready for action.’ In other words, ‘Let’s go, let’s get behind this thing, let’s roll.’ I am the one who would like to know, ‘Where are we going?’ I have a right to know. I have land that our family has had over fifty years. I was born and brought up in the neighborhood. I spent almost every day of my entire life there.<sup>154</sup>

The testimony of one speaker, a longtime resident on the east side, expressed his belief that the “entire purpose of this hearing ... is to give all of us who have any direct involvement in this thing a chance to have our say...”<sup>155</sup> But it is clear from the timing of the hearings, the numerous meetings of the Renewal Committee that had preceded it, the extensive planned testimony of city officials, and the many (and presumably also planned) statements of Renewal Committee representatives that the hearings in the summer of 1958 were essentially a formality. The time for “direct involvement” had largely past.

Given the large number of people who would ultimately be displaced by the Wooster Square project, the fact that there was no coordinated effort to oppose the plan is somewhat surprising. There are several possible explanations. Some of Wooster Square’s residents were roomers, and as such were a transitory population. Their relatively weak ties to the area, and to each other, could account for their lack of involvement in planning its future. Additionally, some residents were already making plans to leave as a result of the planning for Interstate 91; they too would have had little stake in helping to shape a neighborhood they would soon be departing. On the opposite end, hundreds of people in Wooster Square had only arrived in the area within the last few years, in many cases as a result of displacement from the Oak Street project. Such new arrivals likely would not have had the neighborhood relationships, social currency or political clout necessary to launch an opposition to the powerful renewal machine.

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<sup>154</sup> Id. (statement of Charles DeMuisis, 79).

<sup>155</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Ernest Celotto, 88-89).

Mayor Lee had also worked to gain the support of many Italian and black leaders, effectively dampening potential opposition from citywide groups like the NAACP. Just as Lee used patronage and key appointments to win over many Italians to the Democratic Party, he deliberately hired black people to work for the city and made efforts to help black people access jobs in the private sector.<sup>156</sup> As with the Italians, these efforts “endeared him to the more stable black residents of the city who were in a position to benefit from his program” and move into middle-class jobs,<sup>157</sup> even as poor black people were disproportionately displaced by renewal projects.

Several sources suggest another explanation for the relative lack of protest to the Wooster Square project plan: many people who would ultimately be affected by it may simply not have known that it included them. When the City began to explore the possibility of urban renewal in the area in 1955, the chair of the Redevelopment Agency noted that the proposed study area was larger than the Wooster Square neighborhood itself, instead comprising most of the Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth Wards.”<sup>158</sup> As a result, the Wooster Square *project area* was considerably larger than what many people thought of as the Wooster Square *neighborhood*, an understandable confusion that the press helped to compound and that remained unclear to many as late as 1958.<sup>159</sup> Though there had been five open neighborhood meetings from 1955-1958 to discuss the renewal plan and meetings were advertised through newspapers and radio

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<sup>156</sup> Yohuru Williams, 13. BLACK POLITICS / WHITE POWER: CIVIL RIGHTS, BLACK POWER, AND THE BLACK PANTHERS IN NEW HAVEN. Brandywine Press: St. James, NY, 2000.

<sup>157</sup> Williams, 13.

<sup>158</sup> July 7, 1955 letter from acting RA Chair to Board of Aldermen, 2. New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Box 103.

<sup>159</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing At City Hall* (New Haven, June 30, 1958) (statement of Gordon Sweet, 47).

publicity,<sup>160</sup> it was clear that the message had not gotten across. At the June 1958 hearing on the project, the Executive Director of the Citizens Action Commission clarified that the Wooster Square residential neighborhood was:

a section of fine old houses where the residents have pride in their neighborhood and are determined to bring it back to its former condition, as one of the most pleasing and desirable parts of the city ... [In contrast] the total project area contains ... many blocks of slums, blight and decay which are a threat not only to the Wooster Square neighborhood itself but the well-being of people and property in adjacent sections of New Haven.<sup>161</sup>

The fact that this confusion was apparently so widespread that it needed to be addressed on the eve of the project's approval is troubling. Many residents – including many who had breathed a sigh of relief to have escaped the path of the planned highway – were encompassed within a project they may understandably have believed had nothing to do with them. Several people at the 1958 hearings testified to this effect; one longtime resident explained that he had thought of Wooster Square as extending only to Chestnut Street, and “That is why I felt that I had no need for concern when this whole thing came up.”<sup>162</sup> Upon realizing he did stand to lose his home – which was, according to him, nice and entirely habitable – he wondered why he and others on the east side had never been invited to attend any of the Renewal Committee meetings. “It is not as though we were not interested. I am sure we are more than interested, because it is our homes that are going to be razed to the ground.”<sup>163</sup> The dissenting voices at the 1958 public hearings are all the more powerful when one considers that they likely represented only a small fraction of those whose interests were, unbeknownst to them, very much at stake.

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<sup>160</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Louis Longobardi, 87).

<sup>161</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing At City Hall* (New Haven, June 30, 1958) (statement of Gordon Sweet, 47).

<sup>162</sup> *Wooster Square Redevelopment and Renewal Plan: Hearing Before the Aldermanic Committee on Streets and Squares* (New Haven, July 14, 1958) (statement of Ernest Celotto, 88-89).

<sup>163</sup> *Id.* (statement of Ernest Celotto, 90).

Despite the open questions, deep disagreements and fundamental misunderstandings that the 1958 hearing, urban renewal in Wooster Square forged ahead. The plan was approved in the fall of 1958 and was put into motion the following year.

## **VII. “A SCALPEL, NOT A BULLDOZER”**

During the planning phases of the Wooster Square renewal project, the interests of the Renewal Committee and the Redevelopment Agency converged around order, the promotion of home ownership, and the displacement of tenants, roomers, and industrial uses that, in the eyes of the reformers, kept the neighborhood from reaching its full potential. The eager participation of residents on the west side helped to spur the project along and gave credence to the assertion that urban renewal offered important avenues to opportunity – at least for some. As the plan got underway, the symbiosis between homeowners eager to make their way to the middle class and a City eager to produce a dramatic showcase of successful rehabilitation continued. Rehabilitation specialists worked closely with homeowners to bring out the full potential of their homes – and, by extension, the homeowners themselves. Mayor Lee and the Redevelopment Agency consistently brought the before-and-after story of Wooster Square to the national stage, solidifying the public lore of the Wooster Square project as an unmitigated success.

Specialists hired by the Redevelopment Agency were intimately involved with every aspect of rehabilitation, identifying homes in need of repair, encouraging home owners to commit to renovations, and helping them develop plans to complete the necessary improvements. Staffers from the local field office would first visit a home to inform the homeowner of the services

available under the rehabilitation program and collect information about the family.<sup>164</sup> After a visit from the housing code inspector, the inspector would give the information he had collected to rehabilitation specialists who would then make recommendations for improvements. The staff architect would study other homes on the block and the history of the building and suggest improvements, taking into account both what he had learned about the building and his understanding of the financial ability of the homeowner.<sup>165</sup> The rehabilitation specialist and an architect would visit the homeowner again, giving him “a work sheet containing all housing code violations, methods for their correction, and all additional staff recommendations. The rehabilitation specialist checks out all pertinent codes and permits; makes available a list of contractors whose references have been thoroughly examined; works with the building department; checks over contracts; and in some instances, prepares rough cost estimates of the work involved.”<sup>166</sup> Rehabilitation specialists made sure that their interactions with homeowners were thoughtful, encouraging and collaborative.

The City had several means of urging homeowners to make repairs. First, homeowners could only access mortgages insured by the Federal Housing Administration if they brought their properties up to the FHA’s standards, and the FHA tied these standards to New Haven’s housing code requirements.<sup>167</sup> Thus, bringing one’s home up to code would open the door to significant federal funding that was otherwise off-limits. Second, homeowners who failed to comply with the requirements of the code could be fined or even imprisoned. Finally, if a homeowner was unwilling or unable to rehabilitate, the agency was empowered to purchase the

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<sup>164</sup> Mary S. Hommann, *Neighborhood Rehabilitation is Working in Six Neighborhoods in New Haven – Here’s How*, 19 JOURNAL OF HOUSING (May 1962). National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, Washington, D.C.

<sup>165</sup> Id.

<sup>166</sup> Id.

<sup>167</sup> Hommann, *Neighborhood Rehabilitation Is Working*.

property through the use of eminent domain, which typically required homeowners to vacate within 90 days.<sup>168</sup> Condemnation – euphemistically called “peaceable possession” in many of the Redevelopment Agency’s internal memos<sup>169</sup> – provided a credible threat to families who were unwilling or unable to cooperate. As Hommann described it, “we carry a big stick-in fact, two big sticks-and can afford to speak softly.”<sup>170</sup>

The renewal plan also called for the conversion of rooming houses into residential establishments, and Court Street became the target of an early and aggressive rehabilitation effort. Concerned that Court Street had “degenerated into a rooming house and skid-row area,”<sup>171</sup> the City targeted the block, determined to rid it of what renewal officials described as “squalor beyond imagination.”<sup>172</sup> Initially built as single-family homes intended for New Haven’s industrial middle class,<sup>173</sup> by the 1920s, Court Street had become a working-class rooming house area where immigrants were in the majority.<sup>174</sup> By the 1950s, tenants were “more transient and more troubled,” and single men were the majority of occupants of the properties, which were mostly controlled by working-class resident owners.<sup>175</sup> As early as 1957, private developers had begun to acquire properties on the street, converting rooming houses into apartments and pricing the new units at three times the cost of the single rooms they displaced.<sup>176</sup> Encouraged by these efforts, the City was able to persuade the owners of

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<sup>168</sup>Letter from Adams to Mermin (“Re: Russo, 37 Chestnut Street”), February 24, 1965. New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Box 676, Folder R-1 Residential Relocation Correspondence, 1957-197\_.

<sup>169</sup> See, for instance, the memo re “status of Coppola Site, 116-124 Wooster Street,” January 11, 1965 (recommending that “Peaceable possession should be instituted” against 3 uncooperative families). New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Box 676, Folder R-1 Residential Relocation Correspondence, 1957-197\_.

<sup>170</sup> Hommann, *Neighborhood Rehabilitation Is Working*.

<sup>171</sup> Hasbrouck, 40.

<sup>172</sup> Peter Gambaccini, *The Decline and Rise of Wooster Square: A Landmark Success*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, August 7, 1977.

<sup>173</sup> Brainard, 7-8.

<sup>174</sup> Brainard, 10.

<sup>175</sup> Brainard, 13.

<sup>176</sup> Brainard, 19.



**Court Street Row Houses: Before.** Photos taken by the Redevelopment Agency after the purchase of the Court Street townhouses reveal varying conditions in rooming houses.<sup>178</sup> Though relatively modest, “Such accommodations were palatial in comparison with the cheap lodging houses, cubicle hotels, and flophouses found in large cities.”<sup>179</sup>

roughly ten of the row houses to undergo rehabilitation. However, the bias toward detached, single-family homes made it difficult for owners to acquire either conventional or FHA-backed mortgages, and many owners could not afford to finance the costs of renovation.<sup>177</sup> Rather than leave the job of rehabilitation half-done, the Redevelopment Agency decided to buy the homes of the remaining owners, renovate them, and then sell them on the private market. Although accounts favorable to urban renewal would later describe the townhouses sold to the City as belonging to owners who either “neglected to comply”<sup>180</sup> with the housing code or “preferred to sell,”<sup>181</sup> it is likely that many of the working-class homeowners, long reliant on the income roomers had provided, were unable to cover the costs of the rehabilitation being imposed on them, and were compelled to sell in the absence of other alternatives.

After acquiring the townhouses, the city set to work to refashion them into stylish, sophisticated residences. The 15 row houses acquired by the Redevelopment Agency initially

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<sup>177</sup> Brainard, 19.

<sup>178</sup> New Haven City Plan Department, ca. 1961. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>179</sup> Brainard, 15.

<sup>180</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 49.

<sup>181</sup> Talbot, 138.

contained 124 rooming units and eight apartments<sup>182</sup>; after the properties were gutted and restored, each townhouse contained only two apartments,<sup>183</sup> one of which was required to be owner-occupied.<sup>184</sup> When the Redevelopment Agency put the townhomes up for sale, it emphasized the townhomes' "prestige value" and promised "city living at its finest."<sup>185</sup> "Here is the fashionable town house par excellence right in New Haven,"<sup>186</sup> promotional materials declared. Emphasizing the homes' "tastefully decorated facades," modern kitchens and bathrooms, and beautiful landscaping, advertisements for the project underscored that "the Court Street town house will appeal to the family looking for the urban feeling in house and community"<sup>187</sup> – a clear statement about the Redevelopment Agency's priority of replacing transient roomers with what the RA regarded as more stable and desirable tenants.<sup>188</sup>

Priced at \$21,000 each<sup>189</sup> and backed with FHA mortgages arranged by the Redevelopment Agency,<sup>190</sup> all of the city-rehabilitated houses were sold the first day they were made available.<sup>191</sup> Families who had been displaced were given first priority in purchasing the town homes, and at least three families were able to return to Court Street.<sup>192</sup> In general, "Most of the families who bought houses on the street, though middle-class, were not wealthy and could not have purchased their homes without the FHA's help" and the rental income from the

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<sup>182</sup> Hasbrouck, 41.

<sup>183</sup> Talbot, 138.

<sup>184</sup> Talbot, 138.

<sup>185</sup> "Town Houses for Sale," promotional brochure, New Haven Redevelopment Agency. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>186</sup> "Town Houses for Sale."

<sup>187</sup> "Town Houses for Sale."

<sup>188</sup> Brainard, 23.

<sup>189</sup> Lois Sabatino, *A Neighborhood That Wouldn't Give Up: Hey Hartford! Take a Look at Wooster Square*, HARTFORD COURANT, September 29, 1974.

<sup>190</sup> Brainard, 19.

<sup>191</sup> Hommann, *Neighborhood Rehabilitation Is Working*.

<sup>192</sup> Brainard, 23.

second apartment each town home contained.<sup>193</sup> Renewal represented a major boost for such families; thanks to the Redevelopment Agency, they were able to buy in to an extremely desirable area, and by the mid-1970s, they were able to sell their town homes for two to three times what they had paid the city.<sup>194</sup> The continued availability of rental units at a variety of price points also enabled some working class families and factory workers to live on Court Street as tenants, even as new tenants increasingly included Yale graduate students and professors, architects, and politicians.<sup>195</sup>



**The Vision for Court Street.** A promotional brochure imagined the rehabilitated Court Street townhomes as sophisticated, stylish enclaves.<sup>196</sup>

Throughout the neighborhood, many other homeowners also benefitted greatly from urban renewal, both in the form of resources made available through the RA and by virtue of the heightened quality of the surrounding properties. The Federal Housing Act of 1961 permitted FHA to insure home improvement loans of up to \$10,000 with 20 years to pay,<sup>197</sup> giving

homeowners of modest means enough capital to restore their homes with ample time to pay off their debt. Other homeowners, largely factory workers, had been in the habit of saving to ward off financial disaster in the case of lay-offs. Because the years preceding the urban renewal initiative had been relatively prosperous, these owners had ready access to cash that could be

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<sup>193</sup> Brainard, 23.

<sup>194</sup> Sabatino.

<sup>195</sup> Brainard, 24-25.

<sup>196</sup> "Town Homes for Sale."

<sup>197</sup> Stanley W. Penn, *Fighting Blight: Cities Try Renovation of Run-Down Sections Instead of Demolition*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, May 10, 1962.

used for rehabilitation.<sup>198</sup> At a 1963 gathering of 1200 members of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Hommann explained that because Wooster Square was “a neighborhood populated by working class families ... some were [initially] skeptical that these families would be interested in expensive restorations... But they were wrong .... ‘A barber spent \$2500 on his home, a locksmith \$7600 and a funeral director \$10,000.’”<sup>199</sup> The Redevelopment Agency reported that homeowners spent an average of \$5000 per property on renovations, sometimes going well above what they had initially intended.<sup>200</sup> Secure in the knowledge that the entire neighborhood was being reshaped and uplifted by the Redevelopment Agency and encouraged by rising demand for middle-income apartments,<sup>203</sup> landlords and homeowners viewed home improvements as sound investments, and many were inspired to effect upgrades they had been putting off for years.<sup>204</sup>

Hommann’s description of the outreach conducted by rehabilitation specialists reveals the class dynamics at play in the urban renewal project. “One rule is never to use high flown language,” she cautioned. “We don’t say something is ‘aesthetically attractive.’ We say it’s ‘high class,’ ‘first rate’... [and] always ask for a little more than



**Moving on up.** Mayor Lee snaps a photo with a resident of the Wooster Square Project Area.<sup>201</sup> Upon completion of a rehabilitation project, homeowners received an official certificate from the mayor and were later presented with a photograph from the ceremony.<sup>202</sup>

<sup>198</sup> Hommann, *Neighborhood Rehabilitation Is Working*.

<sup>199</sup> Grant, Gerald, *City Planners Stress Need of Preservation*, THE WASHINGTON POST, TIMES HERALD, Oct 20, 1963.

<sup>200</sup> Hommann, *Neighborhood Rehabilitation Is Working*.

<sup>201</sup> New Haven Redevelopment Agency Photograph Collection, 1960. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>202</sup> Id.

<sup>203</sup> Hommann, *Neighborhood Rehabilitation Is Working*.

<sup>204</sup> Peter Gambaccini, *The Decline and Rise of Wooster Square: A Landmark Success*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, August 7, 1977.

we expect to get. If we ask for too much, a homeowner will think we are ivory-tower people and ignore us...”<sup>205</sup> Urban renewal was a chance for the educated, “high class” individuals working for the Redevelopment Agency to help working- and middle-class homeowners to improve their homes and themselves. Even if homeowners and rehabilitation specialists lacked a shared vocabulary around urban renewal, they shared the big idea: Wooster Square could once again be great, and could become the envy of every city in America.

By 1965, Wooster Square had seen \$17 million in new construction and \$3 million in rehabilitation, with more on the way. In all, a total of one thousand Wooster Square buildings were rehabilitated.<sup>206</sup> “The confidence, determination and dedication of the neighborhood residents have played a vital role in the neighborhood’s restoration,” the Redevelopment Agency reported.<sup>207</sup> A moderate-income cooperative had been built, as had housing for the elderly; the signs of renewal were everywhere.<sup>208</sup> “Today, some seven and a half years after work began, it is truly a neighborhood reborn.”<sup>209</sup>

## VIII. THE DISPLACED

Although working- and middle-class homeowners benefitted greatly from urban renewal, many poor people, black people and residents of the eastern side were not so lucky. The Relocation Office created to help the displacees find new places to live was overwhelmed, tasked with finding new homes for families as more and more of the city’s housing was razed. In addition to

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<sup>205</sup> Hommann, *Neighborhood Rehabilitation Is Working*.

<sup>206</sup> Powledge, 69.

<sup>207</sup> New Haven Redevelopment Agency Annual Report 1965, 23. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>208</sup> Id.

<sup>209</sup> Id.

its urban renewal workload, the Family Relocation Office (FRO) had entered into an agreement with the State to assist with the rehousing of people displaced by I-91<sup>210</sup> – more than 400 families within the boundaries of the Wooster Square project alone.<sup>211</sup> The Relocation Office did its best to meet with families, assess their needs, determine eligibility for relocation payments, identify vacancies, and make appropriate referrals, but the office was overwhelmed. Alvin Mermin, longtime director of the Relocation Office, confessed that by 1962, “we were ... hard-pressed with the State's I-91 Project as well as Wooster Square and some Church and Dixwell families. We had been feeling for some time the effect of years of demolition on the housing market.”<sup>212</sup>

Part of the problem was that acquisition of properties for urban renewal and highway construction occurred piecemeal, making it difficult to predict exactly when housing would be needed. As Mermin noted, “It seemed at times like a steam roller without a driver, running at full speed and then mysteriously stopping, with no one person being able to either direct or explain its erratic activity.”<sup>213</sup> Matters were further complicated by the fact that the FRO generally intervened only after the Redevelopment Agency had acquired a building.<sup>214</sup>

Although this policy was intended to keep the FRO’s workload at a manageable level and prevent people from panicking and moving out without any relocation assistance,<sup>215</sup> conducting a needs assessment only after plans had been finalized made it difficult to know what type of housing would be needed and in what quantity, and to plan accordingly.

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<sup>210</sup> Relocation Plan of the New Haven Redevelopment Agency for the State of Connecticut Highway department in Connection with the Interstate 91 Highway Program under Section 13-112, Chapter 23h of the 1958 Revision of the Connecticut General Statutes,” 1958. Mermin Papers, Box VIII, Folder C: Wooster Square Project. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>211</sup> Mermin, RELOCATING FAMILIES, 22.

<sup>212</sup> Unnamed document dated December 10, 1963. Mermin Papers - Studies - Large Family Demonstration Project - Box V, Folder E. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>213</sup> Mermin, RELOCATING FAMILIES, 23.

<sup>214</sup> Id., 56.

<sup>215</sup> Id., 68.

Because the timing and agenda of the family relocation office was dictated by the pace of property acquisition, families were pressured to leave soon after property had been acquired. Letters and memos internal to the Family Relocation Office suggest the tensions this approach created. For example, a 1963 memo discussing the temporary relocation of a 16-person family that lived on Jefferson Street noted “the pressure from the Redevelopment Agency to move this family so the parcel could be turned over to a developer. In such instances,” the author complained, “it would seem proper for the disposition of ... land to be geared to the ability of the relocation office to absorb the families to be displaced. Only thus can we hope to avoid such cases where a family is forced to become overcrowded and to pay rent beyond [its] means.”<sup>216</sup> Similarly, after the Redevelopment Agency had negotiated the purchases of 2 homes on Greene Street and Chapel Street, a colleague of Mermin’s stressed to him that, “you should exert a great deal of effort to relocate the DiVeniero and Amarante families within the next 30 days ... you have no choice but to really get to work on them.”<sup>217</sup>

Widespread demolition of housing, coupled with stricter enforcement of the housing code’s quality controls and occupancy limits, greatly reduced the City’s stock of low-income rental units, and the construction of new housing did not keep up with the needs of the displaced. Although New Haven implemented several innovative programs to increase low-income housing – for instance, New Haven was the first city in America to provide low-rent housing for large families in privately owned leased units, and the first to develop cooperative housing (including in Wooster Square) for both low and moderate-income families under Section

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<sup>216</sup> Unnamed document dated December 10, 1963. Mermin Papers - Studies - Large Family Demonstration Project - Box V, Folder E. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>217</sup> Letter from Chuck Shannon to Al Mermin, July 9, 1965. New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Box 676, Folder R-1 Residential Relocation Correspondence, 1957-197\_.

221(d)(3) of the Housing Act<sup>218</sup> – there were major barriers to the creation of low-income housing in the city. Even though many proponents of urban renewal averred concern for the poor, opposition to plans for low-income housing was widespread and persistent, “whether a low-income, middle-income, or an upper-income area; whether it’s a racially mixed, predominantly black, or predominantly white neighborhood.”<sup>219</sup> Neighborhood resistance and funding constraints meant that housing construction consistently fell below the Redevelopment Agency’s optimistic projections, and overall the creation of low-income housing was “grossly inadequate ... At least 7,850 housing units were demolished” from 1956-72 while “2,214 new units were opened, resulting in a net loss of 5,636 units for low- and moderate-income households.”<sup>220</sup> By 1966, less than one percent of the 1615 housing units built under urban renewal had been created for low-income families; at the same time, the waiting list for public housing was roughly fifteen hundred families.<sup>221</sup> In 1965, the Redevelopment Agency minimized the problem, stating that “homes [of the displaced] were unlivable slums, and there never was any question of there being enough good homes at the right price elsewhere in New Haven, or of the ability of the expert Relocation Office to handle the job.”<sup>222</sup> Unfortunately for those pushed out, the reality was much more grim than this optimistic description suggests. The situation was particularly grim for people displaced in the earlier part of the urban renewal period, including many of those in Wooster Square. The “timing of construction meant that people uprooted by the early renewal projects were only accidentally beneficiaries of new

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<sup>218</sup> Memo from Mathew Ruoppolo, Chairman, Redevelopment Agency, to Members of the RA. June 8, 1970. New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Box 3. Folder G: Sosnoff-Whitney “White Paper.”

<sup>219</sup> Id.

<sup>220</sup> Fainstein & Fainstein, 42 (citing data from the New Haven Redevelopment Agency and RELOCATING FAMILIES).

<sup>221</sup> Letter from to federal housing authorities from representatives from organizations in the Hill, Newhallville, and Dixwell, plus the NAACP, CPI and other signatories. (cover letter dated 2/16/68, letter is undated) (citing 1966 report of the New Haven Redevelopment Agency). New Haven Redevelopment Agency Records, Box 3. Folder: Citizens’ Participation in Redevelopment.

<sup>222</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 29.

lower-income housing”<sup>223</sup> – the Relocation Office struggled to place people displaced in the late fifties and early sixties because “up until 1962 there were no new facilities for low-income families at all, only promises and reassurances that the existing supply was adequate.”<sup>224</sup>

Efforts to place families in private rental units were limited to a small handful of neighborhoods; many were unaffordable and others were future project areas, which were off-limits to official relocations since any new arrivals might have to be moved again.<sup>225</sup> As a result, the Relocation Office attempted to integrate these families into a small handful of ‘middle ground’ areas<sup>226</sup> – Newhallville, Dwight, Fair Haven and the Hill. Many landlords were prejudiced against and unwilling to accept black tenants; “still others needed persuasion to accept *any* family from us – white or nonwhite – because of their impression that we dealt only with ‘slum families.’”<sup>227</sup> Large families that exceeded the allowable size for public housing were particularly difficult to place. Although relocation officials did what they could to convince private landlords to accept displacees, the FRO had few tools at its disposal besides persuasion.

Urban renewal also drove up rents citywide, making it difficult for displacees to find appropriate housing elsewhere. The dramatic reduction in the number of low-income housing units, the large and ever-greater number of displaced people and the gentrification underway in renewal areas like Wooster Square created a landlord’s market where landlords could demand higher prices than ever before.<sup>228</sup> Wooster Square’s Court Street area demonstrates this trend.

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<sup>223</sup> Fainstein & Fainstein, 42 (citing data from the New Haven Redevelopment Agency and RELOCATING FAMILIES).

<sup>224</sup> Mermin, RELOCATING FAMILIES, 91.

<sup>225</sup> Id., 41.

<sup>226</sup> Unnamed document dated December 10, 1963. Mermin Papers - Studies - Large Family Demonstration Project - Box V, Folder E. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>227</sup> Mermin, RELOCATING FAMILIES, 13.

<sup>228</sup> Unnamed document dated December 10, 1963. Mermin Papers - Studies - Large Family Demonstration Project - Box V, Folder E. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

Pre-renewal, 1-bedroom apartments in the city-rehabilitated townhouses had rented for \$25-\$50. After rehabilitation, these same units rented for \$75-\$90,<sup>229</sup> and the lowest-cost rooms had disappeared altogether. It is unlikely that many of those displaced were able to return.

A 1964 report on the housing of families displaced by urban renewal noted that virtually every relocation study from the 1930s onward reported higher rents resulting from a reduced supply and increased demand for housing; the burdens of these increases fell heavily on the poorest people, whose rent-to-income ratios increased significantly.<sup>230</sup> Within Connecticut, 1963 report on relocation in New Haven, Hartford and several other cities found that urban renewal tended to cause minorities “to move to more segregated accommodations and ... pay higher rents than if they had not been forced to relocate.”<sup>231</sup>

Between 1958 and 1974, roughly 2,155 of 3,069 of Wooster Square’s housing units (roughly seventy percent) were demolished and many more were vacated for renovations, “rarely to be occupied by their original inhabitants.”<sup>232</sup> 2,710 households were relocated,<sup>233</sup> comprising an estimated 7,913 people.<sup>234</sup> This is more people than were displaced from any other renewal area, and more than twice the number of people displaced from Dixwell, the Hill, Oak Street, and other neighborhoods traditionally thought of as the “failures” of the urban renewal period.<sup>235</sup> Striking as these figures are, they almost certainly understate the actual displacement caused by urban renewal efforts and highway construction in the area. Redevelopment Agency records suggest that

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<sup>229</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 60.

<sup>230</sup> Chester Hartman, *The Housing of Relocated Families*, 30 JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF PLANNERS, 266, 273 (1964).

<sup>231</sup> *Advisory Group Charges Urban Renewal is Harmful to Negroes*, THE CHICAGO DEFENDER, July 13, 1963.

<sup>232</sup> Fainstein & Fainstein, 45.

<sup>233</sup> *Id.*, 42 (citing data from the New Haven Redevelopment Agency and RELOCATING FAMILIES)

<sup>234</sup> Rae, 341 (citing Mermin Papers, 1970, New Haven Colony Historical Society).

<sup>235</sup> Rae, 339.

State Highway Department records may have lost cases of households displaced by road construction, particularly in the rights of way for Oak Street and I-91. Even more important may be the exclusion from official records of households who moved prior to eviction in anticipation of renewal or in response to landlord divestment and communal disintegration exacerbated by urban renewal. Also uncounted are households within project areas (which are very large in New Haven) but not in target sites. Depending on which of these additional categories of households are defined as ‘displaced’ by urban renewal, the final figure for *displacement* may easily be 50 to 100 percent greater than that for *relocation*.<sup>236</sup>

The record confirms that in the Court Street area, many roomers left on their own initiative after hearing news of impending acquisition by the city. “Thus by the time a building became the property of the Redevelopment Agency, the rooms were often vacant ... [and] it is not known where the majority found subsequent accommodations.”<sup>237</sup> In all likelihood, displaced moved to other “slum” areas in the city, or became homeless.<sup>238</sup> Similar patterns unfolded throughout the Wooster Square project area. If one takes as true Mermin’s estimate that a total of 1466 Wooster Square families were officially “relocated,”<sup>239</sup> it is likely that half or more of the families displaced from the area received no help with relocation. Such a pattern would be consistent with studies of displacement in Boston, Providence, New York and Chicago, which suggested that anywhere from fifty to as little as six percent of families found their new homes with the assistance of relocation officials.<sup>240</sup> Although the Relocation Office was aware that families and individuals relocated themselves without aid and officials endeavored to trace and provide help to those who had left,<sup>241</sup> it is almost certain that many, if not most such people were “lost” to the record.

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<sup>236</sup> Fainstein & Fainstein, 43.

<sup>237</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 49 (discussing the Court Street roomers).

<sup>238</sup> Brainard, 23 (discussing the Court Street roomers).

<sup>239</sup> Mermin, RELOCATING FAMILIES, 15.

<sup>240</sup> Hartman, 275.

<sup>241</sup> Relocation Plan of the New Haven Redevelopment Agency for the State of Connecticut Highway department in Connection with the Interstate 91 Highway Program under Section 13-112, Chapter 23h of the 1958 Revision of

The displacement caused by the I-91 and by the urban renewal initiative had racially disparate impacts. Although over half of those displaced were white, nonwhite families constituted a disproportionate share of those displaced by urban renewal and “any one family of color had a far greater chance of being relocated than any single white family.”<sup>242</sup> Families of color were placed in public housing over three times as often as white families. In contrast, whites made more than three times the number of in-town home purchases as non-whites, in large part because many whites owned homes condemned under urban renewal and received market-rate compensation when the city acquired their properties.<sup>243</sup>

To the extent that the drive for slum clearance was motivated by the desire to see to it that “a growing black neighborhood was surgically removed from the downtown area,”<sup>244</sup> it largely succeeded. Between 1960 and 1967, the black population in Wooster Square south of Grand Avenue<sup>245</sup> declined by 79%, despite a citywide increase of 40% in this same period.<sup>246</sup> The black population in Census Tract 21, the northern area that contained Farnam Courts, fell by 24% from 1960-1967.<sup>247</sup> However, because a significant number of black people had migrated to this area by the late 1950s and in-migration continued during the 1960s, the area was 40% black by 1967.<sup>248</sup> Thus, urban renewal had the effect of reducing the black population in the residential area surrounding Wooster Square Park, while increasing segregation between that enclave and

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the Connecticut General Statutes,” 1958. Mermin Papers, Box VIII, Folder C: Wooster Square Project. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>242</sup> Rae, 340.

<sup>243</sup> Rae, 341 (citing Mermin Papers, 1970, New Haven Colony Historical Society).

<sup>244</sup> Fainstein & Fainstein, 45 (citing data from the New Haven Redevelopment Agency and RELOCATING FAMILIES).

<sup>245</sup> These statistics refer to the population decrease in Census Tract 22 (later 1422).

<sup>246</sup> Phillip Allan Singerman, 211. *Politics, Bureaucracy and Public Policy: The Case of Urban Renewal in New Haven*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 1980.

<sup>247</sup> Singerman, 211.

<sup>248</sup> Scott M. Soloway, 4. WOOSTER SQUARE: REVISITING URBAN RENEWAL. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, February 1988.

the area north of Grand Avenue. In absolute numbers, though, poor and working-class white families were the big losers in Wooster Square. More than two thirds of the total population of the area disappeared,<sup>249</sup> and over half of those displaced were white. From 1950 to 1970, the white population in Wooster Square declined by over 13,000.<sup>250</sup>

By the mid-1970s, rents had skyrocketed to over \$400 a month and “Some old timers in Wooster Square ... [were] astonished at the new high class atmosphere their efforts helped produce ... New owners and tenants ... tend to be attorneys, architects, physicians, and other professional people.”<sup>251</sup> This change should have come as no surprise to the homeowners who had eagerly collaborated with the Redevelopment Agency throughout the urban renewal project in the interest of their own and the neighborhood’s advancement. The uplift they had sought would not have been possible without the displacement of scores of poor people and their replacement with higher-class neighbors whose arrival was both foreseeable and, to many, expressly desired.

## IX. THE IMAGE OF WOOSTER SQUARE

*“That is what urban renewal should be all about. People having fun in attractive surroundings. Can you imagine what New York would be like with a hundred Wooster Squares?”<sup>252</sup>*

Given the enormous number of people displaced by the Wooster Square project, it is striking that many accounts continued to lavish unqualified praise on the project, even after urban renewal as a whole had become more widely criticized. This is in part the result of a concerted

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<sup>249</sup> Rae, 342.

<sup>250</sup> Rae, 342.

<sup>251</sup> Sabatino.

<sup>252</sup> Talbot, 137.

effort on behalf of Mayor Lee's administration portray Wooster Square as a success. Even before the project launched, the Lee administration with concerned about promoting the public image of Wooster Square, requesting a model of what lay ahead for Wooster Square "so that coming into 1959 we will be able to have it on TV and use it for display purposes ..."<sup>253</sup> Correspondence between Lee and Logue reveals that Lee regarded the project as critical to his political ambitions. "Where are we on Wooster Square?" he impatiently asked in early 1958. "This is getting very important to me for a lot of reasons, especially in connection with the Senate."<sup>254</sup> Sources suggest that the Redevelopment Agency even went so far as to conduct outreach to media outlets that questioned the necessity of the project. In one private letter addressed to Lee, a Redevelopment Agency official wrote:

I had a private talk with Gerry Harrington on Tuesday afternoon and I have his assurance that there will be no more stories like the interview-type article, with pictures, which appeared in the Tuesday *Courier* ... The comments that Hall received from the interviewees did not, Gerry agrees, reflect the accurate opinion of Wooster Square area residents toward renewal. Certainly, a mother pushing a baby carriage who never comes into contact with seedy characters in the area, and a reflective old man of 70 years who otherwise has been sheltered from this group, are no spokesmen for the area.<sup>255</sup>

Although they were residents speaking to their own experiences of the area, those who felt that the neighborhood was fine as it was were, in the Redevelopment Agency's view, per se unrepresentative of the "accurate opinion of Wooster Square residents." That the contact at the *Courier* seems to have agreed not to publish further stories questioning the wisdom of the project in the weeks before its final approval is troubling.

Once the rehabilitation project began, the Redevelopment Agency aggressively sold the plan to national news outlets, many of which seemed captivated by the dramatic rags-to-riches stories

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<sup>253</sup> Letter from Richard Lee, May 27, 1958. Lee Papers, Box 18, Folder 450.

<sup>254</sup> Letter from Richard Lee to Edward Logue, February 3, 1958. Lee Papers, Box 18, Folder 450.

<sup>255</sup> Letter to Richard Lee, June 25, 1958. Lee Papers, Box 18, Folder 450.

the Wooster Square renewal plan presented. “New Haven Sets An Example,” *The Wall Street Journal* declared in 1962, praising the city’s innovative rehabilitation of Court Street and its use of the demonstration project to encourage private rehabilitation. The article emphasized how working-class residents had benefitted from the project: “Says ... a retired factory worker who spent \$5000 to redecorate and re-roof his six-family building near Wooster Square: ‘It was the best money I ever spent.’”<sup>256</sup> That same year, a series

of articles in the *Journal of Housing* extensively described the efforts in Wooster Square, lending the project visibility among housing and redevelopment officials across the nation and serving as a how-to guide for cities that might wish to follow

in New Haven’s footsteps. One article boldly proclaimed that “Neighborhood Rehabilitation is

Working in Six Neighborhoods in New Haven – Here’s How.”<sup>257</sup> In the article, Hommann emphasized the close working relationship between rehabilitation specialists and homeowners, noting that the former were so deeply involved that they effectively served as “confidential counselors to the homeowner as long as they are needed.”<sup>258</sup> The article also emphasized the role of Ted De Lauro, a project staffer and “a man who grew up in the neighborhood and has been a neighborhood leader all his adult life,”<sup>259</sup> and noted that Italian staff in the field office facilitated communication with elderly Italian residents and even helped them apply for citizenship. Ignoring all those who were displaced, Hommann focused on the enthusiasm of local homeowners and the leading role the Wooster Square Renewal Committee had played in



**A prestige address.** “Ten years ago Court Street in New Haven was a skid row. Now it is a prestige address.” *The New York Times*, 1965.

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<sup>256</sup> Stanley W. Penn, *Fighting Blight: Cities Try Renovation of Run-Down Sections Instead of Demolition*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, May 10, 1962.

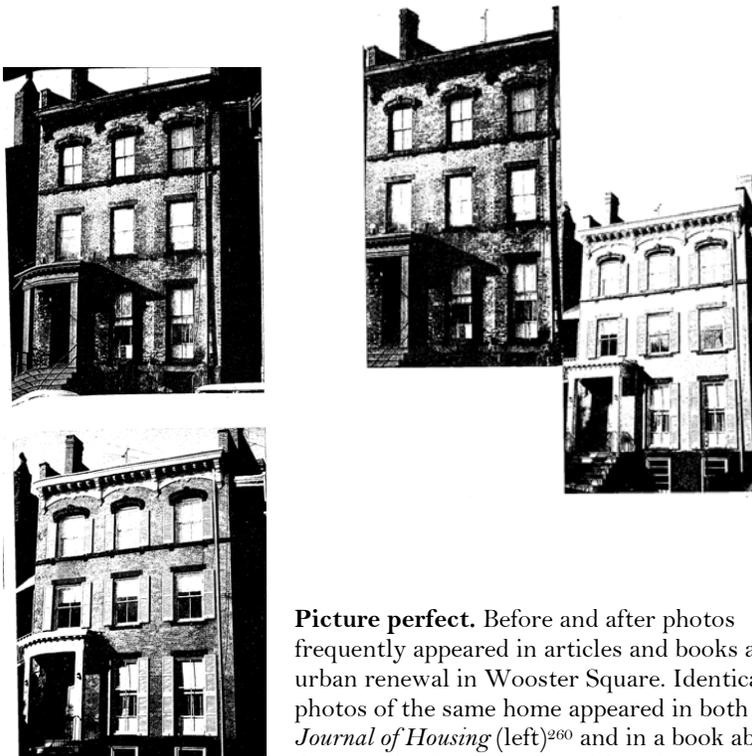
<sup>257</sup> Hommann, *Neighborhood Rehabilitation Is Working*.

<sup>258</sup> Id.

<sup>259</sup> Id.

spearheading the project. In Hommann’s narrative, residents of Wooster Square were active agents in the remaking of their neighborhood, and numerous photographs depicted the striking and beautiful results.

In its 1965 annual report, the Redevelopment Agency proudly proclaimed that Wooster Square “had been the subject of numerous magazine and newspaper articles, an entire book, and occupied much of a 30-minute NBC television show on the New Haven Renewal program. The startling success of the once-blighted neighborhood has sparked enthusiasm in other renewal



**Picture perfect.** Before and after photos frequently appeared in articles and books about urban renewal in Wooster Square. Identical photos of the same home appeared in both the *Journal of Housing* (left)<sup>260</sup> and in a book about Community Progress, Inc. (above)<sup>261</sup>, underscoring the extent to which the public image of Wooster Square was deliberately controlled.

areas, and serves as a model” for other renewal project areas.<sup>262</sup> “Before and after” pictures of homes in Wooster Square regularly appeared in the media, and Mayor Lee presented photos of the area when he testified before the Senate Banking and Currency Committee.<sup>263</sup> Remarking on the

<sup>260</sup> Id.

<sup>261</sup> Gregory Farrell, 36. *A CLIMATE OF CHANGE: THE NEW HAVEN STORY*. Rutgers University Urban Studies Center: New Brunswick, NJ, 1965.

<sup>262</sup> New Haven Redevelopment Agency Annual Report 1965, 23. New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>263</sup> Hommann, *Neighborhood Rehabilitation Is Working*.

numerous tours of Wooster Square that took place during this period, one former resident would later note with bitterness that, “Wooster Square was kept sort of as the Hollywood stage setting when guests would come in to view [Lee’s] great successes...”<sup>264</sup>

A 1965 book on anti-poverty efforts in New Haven referenced “the widely-acclaimed rehabilitation of an old, deteriorating, largely Italian residential and light industrial neighborhood.”<sup>265</sup> The same year, *The New York Times* described the transformation of Court Street from a skid row to a “prestige address,”<sup>266</sup> including a photo of a young white family in front of a row of restored townhouses to illustrate the point.

The Wooster Square project was also lauded in numerous books published by Redevelopment Agency officials, associates of Mayor Lee’s, and others who had been intimately involved in urban renewal, helping to cement its image as a smashing success. Hommann’s *Wooster Square Design* was the first and most comprehensive such account; the book highlighted resident participation in the planning and implementation of the renewal project, and the overwhelming majority of the images in the book were architectural renderings and before-and-after photos of rehabilitated homes. Most of the people depicted in Hommann’s text were proud homeowners; a closing chapter emphasized how the neighborhood had been enriched by Community Progress, Inc. and the lively activities at the Conte School.<sup>267</sup> Again, the people displaced by the project were largely invisible in Hommann’s narrative. In 1966, a book about urban renewal written by a Democratic Alderman lovingly described how, “Wooster Square had been transformed. When I first came to the city the ‘Wooster Street gang’ was spoken of with

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<sup>264</sup> Riccio, 409.

<sup>265</sup> Farrell, 4.

<sup>266</sup> Samuel Kaplan, *New Haven Pursuing the Dream of a Slumless City*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, September 7, 1965.

<sup>267</sup> Hommann, WOOSTER SQUARE DESIGN, 168-183.

uneasiness... Now Wooster Square had become one of the nation's showplaces of rehabilitation and renewal."<sup>268</sup>

By 1967, Allan Talbot's *Mayor's Game* – the inside view of a city employee who had worked in the Lee administration from 1960-1965<sup>269</sup> – was somewhat more critical in its assessment of urban renewal in Wooster Square, but still largely positive. Indeed, Talbot's criticisms at times read like reluctant revelations, which he is quick to counter with stubbornly optimistic conclusions. For example, while Talbot is frank about the motivations of some Wooster Square residents to get rid of black people,<sup>270</sup> he ultimately praises them for their tolerance ("Italians of Wooster Square can and do take pride in the peaceful and often generous way they have accepted integration").<sup>271</sup> Though Talbot acknowledges that "no one is completely sure what happened to those who used to live in the Court Street rooming houses," "some owners were too poor to rehabilitate their homes," and I-91 "made an island out of a public housing project which used to be part of the neighborhood," he nevertheless concludes that, "the successes of Wooster Square are more numerous."<sup>272</sup> Powledge's *Model City* also critiques urban renewal for emphasizing physical renewal more than human renewal or citizen participation, yet Wooster Square escapes his rebuke. Instead, he contrasts the successes in Wooster Square to failures elsewhere, writing that, "They lovingly restored Wooster Square, and selfishly ignored the Hill."<sup>273</sup> He asserts that "few [merchants] were forced to leave the neighborhood by the project"<sup>274</sup> – even though an estimated 450 businesses<sup>275</sup> were displaced.

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<sup>268</sup> Miller, xvi.

<sup>269</sup> Williams, 14.

<sup>270</sup> Talbot, 137.

<sup>271</sup> Talbot, 143-144.

<sup>272</sup> Talbot, 145.

<sup>273</sup> Powledge, 333.

<sup>274</sup> Powledge, 41.

<sup>275</sup> Rae, 343.

Numerous accounts in books and the media focused heavily on the architecture in Wooster Square, often leaving unsaid or downplaying the effect urban renewal had had on the area's residents. While rehabilitation and renewal were underway, Wooster Square became "a mecca for planners and architects throughout the country."<sup>276</sup> Elizabeth Mills Brown, a noted preservationist and urban historian, wrote a volume on Wooster Square in behalf of the New Haven Preservation Trust in 1969, cataloging the area's attractive Victorian homes and underscoring the neighborhood's architectural significance.<sup>277</sup> That same year, a profile in *The Hartford Courant* described several townhomes purchased by architects from the New Haven Redevelopment Agency and renovated by their owners to fit their idiosyncratic tastes; the article offered readers an inside peek into the townhomes' creative uses and "free, expansive living spaces."<sup>278</sup> By 1970, Wooster Square became New Haven's first local historic district, and in 1971, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>279</sup> These developments helped strengthen the public image of Wooster Square as being synonymous with its beautiful architecture. Several years later, the *New York Times* reported that "the highway was good news for the beleaguered neighborhood" because "industrial blight and the spread of tenements had at one time threatened to engulf and strangle Wooster Square..."<sup>280</sup> Again focusing on buildings rather than people, the article noted that "Wooster Square's houses were in severe disrepair" and that the "final design of Interstate 91 helped realize" the neighborhood's potential for historic preservation.<sup>281</sup> All of these narratives were variations on the theme that

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<sup>276</sup> Hasbrouck, 13.

<sup>277</sup> Elizabeth Mills Brown, AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF WOOSTER SQUARE AND ITS ARCHITECTURE, 1825-1880. New Haven: New Haven Preservation Trust, 1969.

<sup>278</sup> *New Haven Brownstones Comeback*, THE HARTFORD COURANT, February 9, 1969.

<sup>279</sup> Historic Wooster Square Association, <http://www.historicwoostersquare.org/woostersquarehistory.html> (accessed May 5, 2013).

<sup>280</sup> Peter Gambaccini, *The Decline and Rise of Wooster Square: A Landmark Success*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, August 7, 1977.

<sup>281</sup> Gambaccini.

what was important about Wooster Square was ultimately not the people who once lived there, but the buildings that had been great, had fallen from glory and were saved just in time.

Many articles on Wooster Square dramatized the neighborhood's decline in the years before urban renewal, the better to tell the story of its impressive ascent in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, a 1974 *Courant* piece that urged Hartford to look to New Haven as an example of the type of restoration that was possible began by explaining how homes had been

overcrowded and neglected. Cheap storefronts grew and stucco peeled... as front porches and columns rotted ... the neighborhood had degenerated to a slum, ready for destruction. Then wonderful things happened. Children of Italians who had moved away moved back to the old neighborhood. Professors and politicians and architects took a closer look at the old houses. Everybody decided to work to rebuild the neighborhood, together.<sup>282</sup>

Of course, the “everybody” who worked together did not include the two thirds of the population that had been displaced, and nor were those people in a position to enjoy the idyllic scene the author described. Although the piece acknowledges criticism of urban renewal, it deflects such critique by positioning Wooster Square itself as the entity worth saving: “Even the Redevelopment Agency, sometimes accused of helping to break down the square’s spirit, can be credited with helping it after all.”<sup>283</sup> The harm to the former residents whose spirits may have been broken is downplayed in view of the clear boon to “the square’s spirit.” In a similar vein, *The Wall Street Journal* personified Wooster Square in a 1985 article describing its path to glory, saying the “slum” neighborhood “rose from its decay so that the square has become a national model of renewal, a haven of graceful old houses surrounded by a graceful old square.”<sup>284</sup> The neighborhood continued to serve as a model of an urban renewal project that

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<sup>282</sup> Sabatino.

<sup>283</sup> Sabatino.

<sup>284</sup> Bill Ryan, *Neighborhood Has Flavor of Italy: Connecticut Crossroads*, THE HARTFORD COURANT, November 24, 1985.

“worked” in a 1997 piece in *The Hartford Courant*, which marveled that, “Redevelopment of New Haven's Wooster Square neighborhood, epicenter of the Northeast pizza zone, was so artfully done that most people don't know it was redeveloped.”<sup>285</sup>

## X. REMEMBERING WOOSTER SQUARE

Popular accounts of Wooster Square reflect a simple truth: history is written by the victors. During the 1950s and 1960s, those who were displaced by I-91 and by urban renewal were dispersed to other neighborhoods, making it difficult to keep track of them and what their experiences had been. Once people began to leave Wooster Square, they were integrated into and became a part of the stories of the new neighborhoods they came to call home, and those who remained in Wooster Square were left to tell its tale. Lacking strength in numbers or community institutions through which to unite, many of those who moved to the suburbs likely were absorbed into the heterogeneous landscapes of their new communities. Within New Haven, many black families displaced from Wooster Square moved to the Hill, which would, by the late 1960s, become a major site of contest in the black civil rights movement. The struggle in the Hill would not have unfolded as it did had it not been for the influx of displacees from Wooster Square and other urban renewal neighborhoods. At the same time, Wooster Square itself had changed dramatically by the time of the 1967 riots, and the failure of many popular accounts to draw the connections between Wooster Square and subsequent civil rights struggles is understandable. The frequent inattention to the stories of those displaced from Wooster Square may also stem from the fact that the neighborhood has retained its Italian

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<sup>285</sup> Tom Condon, *Learn from New Haven's Successes, Failures*, THE HARTFORD COURANT, October 20, 1997 (online at [http://articles.courant.com/1997-10-20/news/9710220842\\_1\\_new-haven-s-successes-long-wharf-slums](http://articles.courant.com/1997-10-20/news/9710220842_1_new-haven-s-successes-long-wharf-slums)).

“flavor,” particularly in the form of its world-famous pizzerias<sup>286</sup> and the continued tradition of certain neighborhood festivals that provide occasion for members of the greater New Haven Italian community to once more descend upon the square.

While the strength of the Italian community in the area today is often exaggerated and pales in comparison with what it once was, many Italians displaced by urban renewal maintain close ties to their old neighborhood. This fact has made it possible for historians to connect with many of those who were displaced in the 1950s and 1960s and to hear their version of the history of Wooster Square. It is by most accounts a story of heartbreak. Anthony Riccio’s 2006 collection on Italian Americans in New Haven<sup>287</sup> includes the voices of many residents with fond memories of their lives in the “slums.” “Everybody just seemed to be a lot happier, that’s basically what it was. You knew your next door neighbor and the one over there and the one over there and everybody knew you,” said one. “Today you’re lucky if you know your next door neighbor, you’re lucky if they talk to you.”<sup>288</sup> Another man mourned the loss of close familial connections he had had in Wooster Square: “We used to live in the same building, the same tenement building. My sisters got married and they lived downstairs. My aunt lived downstairs. My cousins lived downstairs ... And I saw them every day. Now I don’t see them for months at a time because they broke up that neighborhood.”<sup>289</sup> Many speakers contrasted the tight-knit community they had had in Wooster Square with the feelings of estrangement they experienced in their new neighborhoods: “everybody was happy. Because they had

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<sup>286</sup> Numerous media accounts take the continued presence of Frank Pepe’s and Sally’s Apizza as a sign of the “Italian authenticity” the neighborhood as retained. See e.g. Condon (describing Wooster Square as a successful urban renewal project and “epicenter of the Northeast pizza zone”) and Powledge, 41 (concluding that on balance Wooster Square was a successful project, in part because, “One of the finest pizza parlors in the East, Frank Pepe’s, is still there”).

<sup>287</sup> Riccio, *THE ITALIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN NEW HAVEN*, 2006.

<sup>288</sup> Riccio, 350.

<sup>289</sup> Riccio, 360.

nothing. Today everybody's rich. And they think they're somebody, you know ... We used to visit one another. Just talk, you know... Today, I lived here for about thirty years, I don't know my neighbors..."<sup>290</sup> The statements of these former residents echo those captured by Marc Fried in his essay "Grieving for a Lost Home," based on interviews with people forced to relocate from Boston's West End. Fried found that the psychological harms inflicted by forced displacement went far beyond the initial disruption caused by the move itself. Instead, "for the majority it seems quite precise to speak of their reactions as expressions of *grief*," and feelings of loss persisted for years. "In response to a series of questions concerning the feelings of sadness and depression which people experienced *after* moving, many replies were unambiguous: 'I felt as though I had lost everything,' 'I felt like my heart was taken out of me' ..., 'I lost all the friends I knew'..."<sup>291</sup>

Poor though it was, Wooster Square provided networks of social support displacees were hard-pressed to find elsewhere. An early theorist of slums distinguished "slums of despair" from "slums of hope" like Wooster Square:

The slums of 'hope' ... are the home of the stranger, the in-migrant, the recent arrival. These strangers have been attracted to the city by the social or economic opportunities the city offers... The strangers come to the city seeking 'improvement' but, if they lack the language abilities, educational attainments and other necessary social and economic resources, they may find escalation difficult ... They will learn the language [in the slums]. They will become acclimated and they will acquire the cultural resources necessary [to succeed].<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Riccio, 362.

<sup>291</sup> Marc Fried, 151, *Grieving for a Lost Home*, in *THE URBAN CONDITION: PEOPLE AND POLICY IN THE METROPOLIS*, ed. Leonard J. Duhl. Basic Books: New York, 1963.

<sup>292</sup> Charles J. Stokes, *A Theory of Slums*, 38 *LAND ECONOMICS*, 189, 197 (Aug. 1962). University of Wisconsin Press. Online at [www.jstor.org/stable/3144581](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3144581) (accessed April 26, 2013).

In Wooster Square, Italians and Italian Americans had deep networks of support on which to draw even when times were difficult. Although urban renewal did represent an important rung on the ladder of opportunity for the working- and middle-class homeowners who were able to reap its rewards, displacement harmed many others, and “by forcing people to rebuild their lives separately amid strangers ... slum clearance [came] at a serious psychological as well as financial cost to its supposed beneficiaries.”<sup>293</sup>

Many former residents of Wooster Square seem convinced that urban renewal and highway construction through the heart of the neighborhood were deliberate political maneuvers designed to break up what had been a Republican stronghold. “From the standpoint of the Italians ... it had the deliberate effect of driving many Italians out of the city,” said one former resident. “There’s no proof; no one is going to say it ...”<sup>294</sup> Another offered, “He could not break this ward, simply could not take this ward. Coincidental? Of course anybody can make the argument. Was it coincidental that you had the conjunction of I-95 and I-91 right in this ward wiping everything out? We don’t think it was coincidental...”<sup>295</sup> “If you’re looking to get rid of opposition... I’m not saying that’s what happened but that’s the rumor,”<sup>296</sup> said a third. Historian Douglas Rae has questioned the idea that Lee deliberately targeted opposition wards for highways and urban renewal projects, noting that, “Lee’s own 17<sup>th</sup> Ward lost more population than any other in the city during his administration.”<sup>297</sup> But an internal memo reveals that as early as 1958, Lee had requested and received an analysis of the likely effect of

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<sup>293</sup> Herbert J. Gans, 541, *The Failure of Urban Renewal*, in *URBAN RENEWAL : THE RECORD AND THE CONTROVERSY*, James Q. Wilson, ed. M.I.T. Press: Cambridge, MA, 1966.

<sup>294</sup> Riccio, 409.

<sup>295</sup> Riccio, 411.

<sup>296</sup> Id., 412.

<sup>297</sup> Rae, 467.

the Wooster Square Project on the voting patterns in wards Ten, Eleven and Twelve,<sup>298</sup> suggesting that securing victory in these neighborhoods was part of his thought process. Whether or not one believes that political maneuvering accounted for a great part of Lee's motivations, his record speaks for itself. By 1959, Italian voters "split about evenly between Lee and his Republican opponent, James Valenti,"<sup>299</sup> and in the 1965 election, Lee carried the vote in Wooster Square for the first time ever,<sup>300</sup> an outcome likely produced by the homeowners he had co-opted and the detractors he had displaced.

In many cases, residents of Wooster Square felt that the homes destroyed during urban renewal were not the unlivable hovels the Redevelopment Agency made them out to be. "They call them tenement houses," recalled one resident. "But one thing I know – that those Italians kept those co-called tenement houses spanking clean. You could have eaten off those floors in the hallways ..."<sup>301</sup> Another woman recalled that, "those houses were as clean as a whistle. The ladies would even scrub the steps going outdoors!"<sup>302</sup> As Riccio explains, "What New Haven's housing experts and city planners considered substandard housing at the time of urban renewal during the 1950s – poor plumbing facilities, worn finishes on exteriors and unfinished cellars – was an accepted way of life for many of New Haven's Italians who kept their modest homes and cold water apartments meticulously clean."<sup>303</sup>

Urban renewal in Wooster Square seemed designed to help residents reach what reformers perceived as the American dream – stable, single-family, quasi-suburban homes in a "high class"

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<sup>298</sup> Memorandum to Mayor Lee from Ray Wolfinger, July 7, 1958. Lee Papers.

<sup>299</sup> Dahl, 51.

<sup>300</sup> Talbot, 238.

<sup>301</sup> Riccio, 415.

<sup>302</sup> T. Blokland, *Celebrating Local Histories and Defining Neighbourhood Communities: Place-making in a Gentrified Neighbourhood*. 46 *Urban Studies* 1593, 1602 (January 1, 2009).

<sup>303</sup> Riccio, 406.

area. But the reformers seemed blind to the fact that many Italian Americans in the area had already achieved their own versions of the American dream, and the widespread displacement and use of eminent domain caused many people to question the country they had grown to love. As one displaced resident explained,

All their lives, they wanted to buy a house. That was their American dream. You come to America, you get a job, you own your own house and have a garden in back, a vegetable garden and all that and that was their dream. They finally got it, you know ... And they thought they were settled. And then wham!<sup>304</sup>

Another former resident recalled his mother's disbelief when he attempted to explain eminent domain to her. "‘Che gazz e cheste eminent domain.’ What the hell is this eminent domain? She said [in Italian] ‘What are they saying? It’s my house. I paid for it. What do you mean somebody can come and take it? This is America.’"<sup>305</sup> A third critic recounted, "when you come in and say, Well listen now you have to move whether you like it or not, you have to move. That changes your whole perspective ... This is a free country? It’s not a free country."<sup>306</sup> For many in the path of "progress," urban renewal did not represent a fulfillment of the American dream, but its destruction.

## XI. CONCLUSION

Determining whether the rehabilitation and renovation of Wooster Square was a "success" is very much a question of perspective. On the one hand, the process of determining the placement of I-91 and of planning for urban renewal provided important opportunities for

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<sup>304</sup> Id., 424.

<sup>305</sup> Id., 419.

<sup>306</sup> Id., 416.

many residents, particularly homeowners on the west side, to engage in the political process; these residents were able to have a major influence on the projects that would come to reshape their neighborhood. Many homeowners – including middle- and working-class people who had long been shut out from private mortgages – were able to gain access to valuable resources and (as they saw it) improve their quality of life. In these ways, urban renewal in Wooster Square was importantly different than urban renewal as it unfolded elsewhere in New Haven and in other cities where entire neighborhoods were simply razed. To the extent that it encouraged citizen participation and opened opportunities for those who had previously been disfranchised, Wooster Square is a promising model for other communities that believe that a neighborhood's future should be determined to a great degree by all those who live there. In addition, from an aesthetic standpoint, few would argue with Wooster Square's success. Many of its fine homes remain in the fine state they achieved during the urban renewal period, where neighborhoods that relied on more aggressive clearance strategies have seen the products of the urban renewal period come and go or, in some cases, linger on in a state of increasing decay.

But these successes are only part of the story. Thousands were left out of the process, degraded as “slum dwellers,” and pushed out, either to other “slums” or to “nicer” neighborhoods they would never have chosen for themselves. To many Italian Americans, “What came after “the highway” was irrelevant or a negative contribution to their tale of ‘community lost’ ... [in terms of] their places of residence and their everyday interactions.”<sup>307</sup> Many others who were pushed out – in particular the growing black community in the area – were yet more disfranchised and are to a great degree lost in the historical record of Wooster Square, even in accounts that attempt to grapple with the human costs of urban renewal.

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<sup>307</sup> Blokland, 1604.

Ultimately, people need not, and will not, agree about what and who is most important in a process of community development. Even with a full understanding the toll Wooster Square's redevelopment had on those whose lives it disrupted, there are those who would say it was worth the price. Such disagreements are inevitable, and it is reasonable to question what weight should be given to the preferences of residents who stand to be harmed by redevelopment when many complex and pressing issues are at stake. But it is impossible for communities facing these difficult and important conversations to learn from the past when history has been rewritten to exclude those who stood in opposition.

The deliberate maneuvers of the Lee administration, the extent to which the press seems to have been enthralled by Wooster Square as a Cinderella story, and the tendency to forget people who are no longer around have all served to reshape the story of Wooster Square to an easy narrative of neighborhood uplift. Today, the website of the New Haven Preservation Trust describes how clearance and neighborhood destruction were averted by “a fortunate series of circumstances” and “a community-wide conviction that the neighborhood was worth saving.”<sup>308</sup> Newer arrivals to the community “collectively remember[] the pre-regeneration neighborhood as a place where ‘nobody’ wanted to stay. The renewal and historical preservation in tandem had brought about a positive change, architecturally and for ‘the community.’ It had become a better place where ‘everybody’ was professional, understood the value of historical architecture and ‘authenticity’... ‘an island’ surrounded by ‘less decent places.’”<sup>309</sup> In the view of these gentrifiers, the “authentic” character of the neighborhood had been established by industrial elites, and urban renewal “brought back its ‘original’ beauty and

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<sup>308</sup> “Wooster Square Historic District.” New Haven Preservation Trust. Available at [http://nhpt.org/index.php/site/district/wooster\\_square\\_historic\\_district/](http://nhpt.org/index.php/site/district/wooster_square_historic_district/) (accessed April 26, 2013).

<sup>309</sup> Blokland, 1601.

charm. The idea of authenticity as the neighborhood having one ‘true’ character to be reinstalled erased events in between...”<sup>310</sup>

New Haven and other cities that hope to effect redevelopment without repeating the mistakes of the urban renewal period must resist the act of forgetting around Wooster Square. Looking to urban renewal as a cautionary tale for modern-day urban developments, a 2000 article in *Mother Jones*, an extremely progressive publication, upheld Wooster Square as the sole success of urban renewal in New Haven. Making no mention of the thousands displaced, the article described how “residents fought the highway plan and were brought in by Lee to help plan a renewal effort ... Many of the neighborhood's buildings were kept intact, and so was much of the community. The result, today, is a graceful and lively mixed-income neighborhood still filled with families, churches, social clubs, and restaurants.”<sup>311</sup> Though accurate, this description is far from complete, and the claim that “much of the community” remained when some 13,000 people were displaced is specious. Similarly, a 2012 article on the plan to revive the Oak Street area through the construction of the Downtown Crossing noted that, “It will be difficult to capture the charm of neighborhoods such as Wooster Square ... which escaped the punishing effects of urban renewal.”<sup>312</sup> Even as the article addressed a plan to right the wrongs of urban renewal, it perpetuated a major mistake of the period: taking architectural success as evidence that urban renewal had not taken a huge toll on people. These two articles urge modern-day reformers look to Wooster Square as a how-to guide for responsible development. We should instead regard it for what it was: a testament to the incredible difficulties associated

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<sup>310</sup> Id.

<sup>311</sup> Rob Gurwitt, *Death of a Neighborhood*, MOTHER JONES, September/October 2000. Available at <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2000/09/death-neighborhood> (accessed April 26, 2013).

<sup>312</sup> Kenneth R. Gosselin, *New Haven Hoping to Right an Old Wrong; Development Could Reconnect Downtown, Neighborhoods*, HARTFORD COURANT, July 7, 2012, A1. Available at <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1024785435?accountid=15172> (accessed April 4, 2013).

with any plan that stands to fundamentally remake a neighborhood, and a cautionary tale about how difficult it is to do what “the community” wants when that community is home to many American dreams that cannot easily coexist.