



Historic Neighborhood News

FALL 2014

RENÉE KAHN, EDITOR

HISTORIC PRESERVATION
ADVISORY COUNCIL

Stamford's New Watchdogs

*I*N NOVEMBER, 2012, the voters of Stamford approved a revision to the city's charter that called for the formation of an Historic Preservation Advisory Council (HPAC). Although ostensibly "without teeth," its position was expected to have considerable impact on Stamford's planning and review processes. Mayor David Martin recently appointed eight Stamford residents, all professionals from diverse backgrounds in related fields, to serve. Lynn Drobbin, a nationally known preservation consultant with offices in Westchester, serves as Chairman; Anne Goslin, Registrar at the Yale Art Gallery, serves as Vice Chairman; and David Woods, AIA, preservation architect, serves as Secretary. Also serving are Barry Hersh, planner, real estate developer and professor at NYU, and Jill Smyth, Executive Director of the Merritt Parkway Conservancy.

Alternate members are Lynn



Photo: Michael Carugati

Standing left to right in front of the former Atlantic Street Post Office are Rebecca Shannonhouse, David Woods, Jill Smyth, Anne Goslin, Lynn Drobbin, Elena Kalman, Lynn Villency Cohen and Barry Hersh.

Villency Cohen, art historian; Elena Kalman, AIA, architect; and Rebecca Shannonhouse, writer, editor and Chair of the Hubbard Heights Historic District Designation Steering Committee.

"People think preservation focuses on the past, but it's more about the future," says Drobbin. "It's clear that change is necessary for vitality and growth. Our role is to manage that change so that we respect the past and leave a meaningful legacy for the future. By incorporating historic preservation into the wheels of the city bureaucracy,

we can avoid what often becomes an acrimonious relationship between the two seemingly divergent goals."

Among projects recently reviewed by HPAC are the plans for the historic downtown Post Office, the CTDOT's proposed replacement of the 1896 Metro-North Railroad Bridge over Atlantic Street and improvements to Woodland Cemetery. HPAC is also expected to be involved in upcoming school development at the former Sacred Heart Academy on Strawberry Hill Avenue. HNN

Published by Historic Neighborhood Preservation

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The Unwalkable City



Unlike the Parisian boulevards that supposedly inspired it, Tresser Boulevard is totally devoid of architectural charm and human presence.

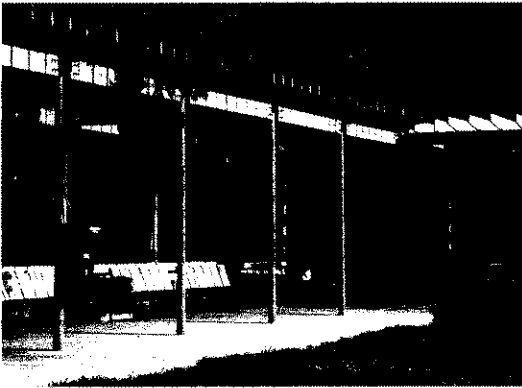
DOWNTOWN STAMFORD, prior to being “urban renewed” in the 1960s, was a shabby but lively walkable city. The deterioration that occurred was expected, due to the age of many of the buildings, but also to the knowledge that properties would soon be acquired by eminent domain and demolished. There were many problems that needed to be addressed; frequent flooding and run-down housing were just a few. The new downtown that was destined to rise in its place was based on the theories of Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier and were designed to make life easy for the automobile by eliminating the maze of

small streets that criss-crossed the 130-acre quadrant. Almost 400 businesses were relocated along with 1,100 households. Despite subsidies, most of the “Mom & Pop” businesses that had been in Stamford for generations did not survive the move. At least half the residents, mostly minorities, wound up in high-rise projects that ringed the downtown. Picturesque streets such as Stage Street, with its former stables and carriage houses and an original blacksmith’s shop, along with Pacific and Main Streets with housing and small neighborhood stores, came down. This jumble of small-city life was replaced by

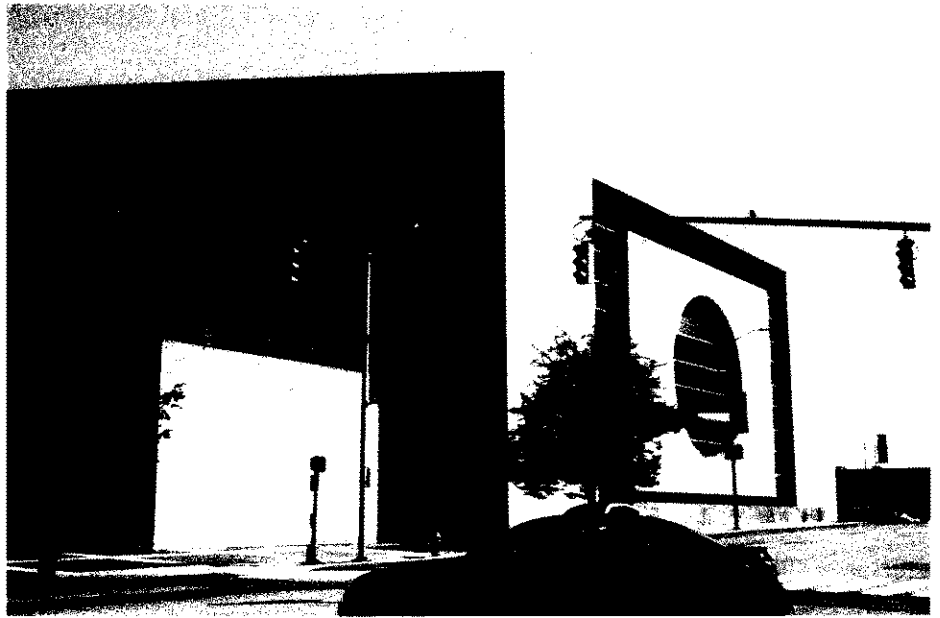
a giant windowless mall that blocked the path of the historic Boston Post Road, the only place along the entire Eastern Seaboard where this would happen.

Once property owners learned that they were to be evicted, any semblance of maintenance vanished and the need to demolish became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Fewer and fewer present-day residents of Stamford even remember the colorful establishments that gave the area character and street appeal: Karp’s Bakery, Freeman’s Yarn, Frank West Hardware, Scalzi Paint, Sabini’s Furniture Store and the Atlantic Fish

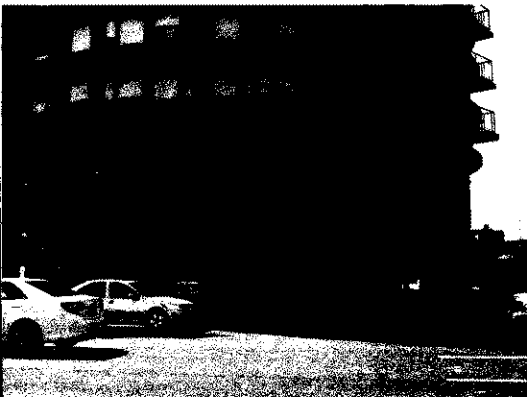
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The poor design of the park at the corner of Broad and Franklin Streets discourages use by students from the adjacent University of Connecticut.



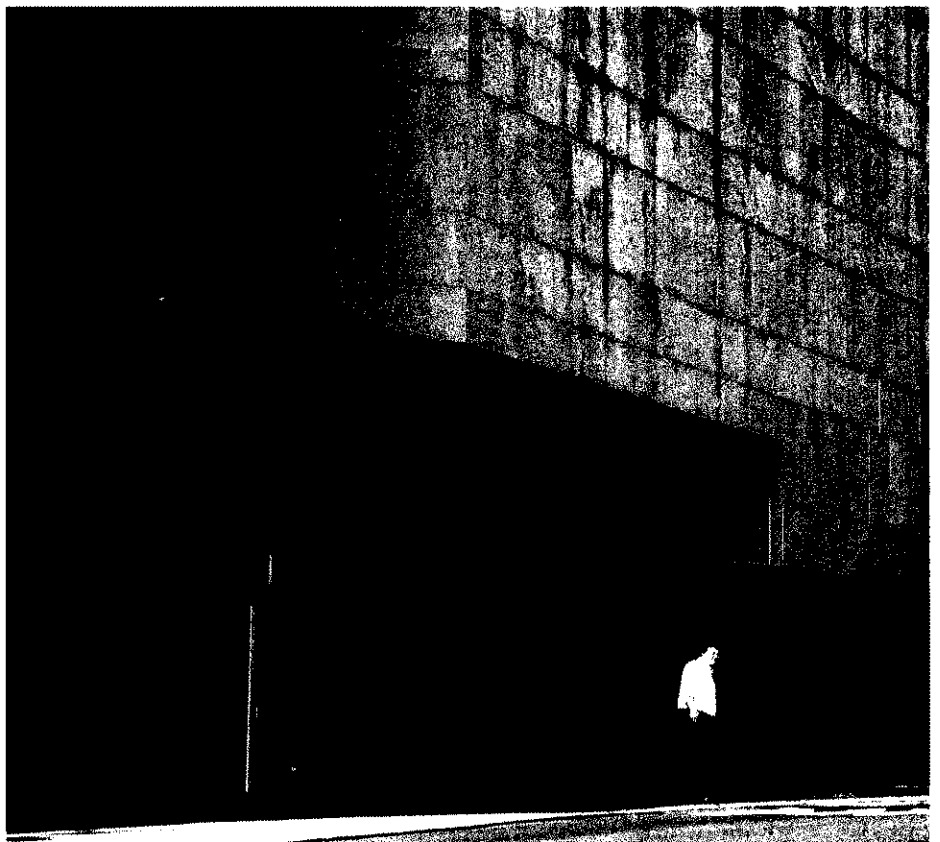
Circular openings in parking garages were a popular cliché of the '70s.



The entry to the affordable housing complex at the corner of Washington and Tresser Boulevards offers a bleak introduction to an otherwise architecturally distinctive building.



The Noguchi-inspired cube no longer rotates at the pedestrian-free corner of Tresser Boulevard and Atlantic Street—and it should be painted red.

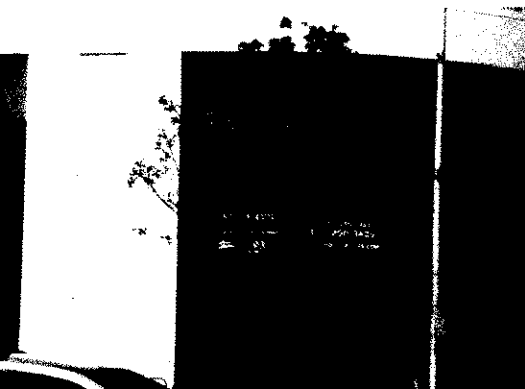


Macy's Department Store on the corner of Broad Street and Greyrock Place is probably one of the most desolate spots in downtown Stamford.



Federal Street, once the site of the former Stamford Municipal Building, now serves as a driveway for the UBS Warburg Center.

Market were among the long-term businesses that were removed. Stamford's version of New York City's Lower East Side was permanently erased. The irony is that in 20/20 hindsight, the urban renewal plan could have been much different, more people-friendly, a mix of old and new. Brilliant ideas, such as the one by builder Thomas Gaines to extend the old canal back to the center of town, were dismissed out of hand. Old Town Hall managed to survive but, for a time, was in danger of becoming "fill in Stamford Harbor" (a quote from the planner who was then head of Stamford's Planning Department). Town Hall was saved; however, the two colorful turn-of-the-century buildings behind it were demolished for an access road to the mall that never got built. Ironically, the mall was called the Stamford Town Center. HNN



The Rich Forum at the corner of Atlantic Street and Tresser Boulevard is lively only when lines gather for the taping of popular TV shows.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Just a Few Problems to Ponder:

Problem #1: If streets are devoid of people, they become more dangerous. Crowded streets actually not only feel safer, they are safer. Read Jane Jacobs *Death and Life of Great American Cities* for more on that topic. She uses her old Greenwich Village neighborhood and North Boston as examples of older communities that work well.

Problem #2: Large boulevards like Tresser and Washington Boulevards are designed for cars, not people. Unlike the boulevards of Paris, these environments are bleak and often lined with high-rise structures that deliberately discourage street life. Because of their excessive width, these roadways are difficult to cross and because of their many garage openings and speeding traffic, they not only look uninviting, they're unsafe.

Problem #3: Parks may look pretty but unless people use them, they become anti-urban wastelands. Who wants to sit alone on a bench and watch buses go by? Plazas also suffer from lack of occupants and are often not perceived of as amenities, but dead space. Christopher Alexander, in his classic study *A Pattern Language*, recommends a maximum diameter of 60' for plazas; larger spaces, he claims, tend to seem deserted (i.e., the former Champion Building on Atlantic Street) unless heavily trafficked.

Problem #4: Several major streets in downtown Stamford have been rendered lifeless by large box stores like Target and Burlington Coat Factory (the former Caldor's). This also applies to fortresses such as Macy's at the mall - oops, the "Town Center." Entry by car is almost mandatory and it is made deliberately difficult for a pedestrian to find his way inside.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Over the years, we have watched city planners struggle to undo the damage of the urban renewal policies of the '60s and create a vibrant, people-oriented downtown. Between over-permissive zoning that encourages the destruction of smaller, human-scaled historic buildings and our national over-dependence on cars, this is not an easy task. At one time, there was talk of demolishing the mall and rebuilding the original grid of crooked streets with attractive, mid-rise apartments along with stores on the ground floor. While this may never happen, there are other ways to humanize the area. It's just going to take time and a lot of effort.

At Historic Neighborhood Preservation's Annual General Meeting, Thursday, October 30th, at Old Town Hall, architect-planner John Massengale, author of *Street Design: The Secret to Great Cities and Towns*, will speak on ways to create a walkable city.

See page 8 for details.



A "Kosher Vegetarian Indian" restaurant at the corner of Atlantic and Main Streets adds visual interest and ethnic diversity to the street.

The Walkable City



IF WE WERE TO ASK OUR readers to come up with their favorite places to walk in Stamford's present day downtown, the answers would be pretty predictable: Bedford Street and maybe a couple of parks plus a few historic areas that narrowly escaped the wrecking ball. We've also discovered some colorful hidden gems you may never have noticed, but who knows how long they'll be around?

Franklin Street, at the corner of North Street, has an interesting cluster of older buildings including the Treasure Shop, which, on occasion, lives up to its name.

Even if you were to expand your search to the outlying "streetcar suburbs," neighborhoods such as Belltown, East Main Street, Springdale, the West Side and the South End, you would still have trouble coming up with many appealing places to walk. City planners are now making every effort to solve problems they created (with good intentions) a half century ago by requiring ground level stores that hopefully will attract street life. Efforts are being made to make the "Ring Roads" (Tresser and Washington Boulevards) more user friendly. HNN



Bell Street, a narrow, one block street behind the Old Town Hall, retains some of its early 20th century scale and charm. A homey restaurant with outdoor seating helps.



The plaza in front of the Ferguson Library and Starbucks is one of the few areas where people congregate in the downtown.

Bedford Street

Bedford Street, with its jumble of architecturally diverse, people-scaled buildings and stores, has become Stamford's most walkable environment. Angled parking slows traffic and encourages street life.



Community Development Director Tim Beeble Retires

WE'RE HAPPY TO SEE Tim retire but sorry to see him go; Tim is one of the best friends the preservation community in Stamford ever had. After 33 years of service, 21 of them as Director of the Stamford Community Development Block Grant office, we know he's ready to move on to new adventures. In fact, he tells us, the minute he announced his retirement, his phone began to ring with offers. During the twenty-five years Tim was director of the program, he saw to it that our agency, the Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program, had a direct role in the retention and rehabilitation of affordable housing in the low-income neighborhoods in which the SCDP was active. Under a half-dozen mayors, Tim was always a voice for preservation, one of the few who saw the connection between rehabilitating older buildings and the broader preservation movement.

We first met Tim around 1980 at his previous job in Paterson, NJ, as a housing development coordinator. Tim was active in turning the empty silk mills in Paterson into artists' loft housing, using the Section 8 program to keep rents affordable. We had heard about the program and a group of us drove to Paterson to check it out, hoping to adapt Mr. Beeble's methods to the largely vacant Yale & Towne complex in Stamford's South End. We were of course delighted when he turned up in the Stamford Community Development Office three years later...a kindred spirit!

During his years in Stamford, Tim oversaw approximately 70 million dollars worth of new construction, rehabilitation and affordable mortgages in the city's low-income neighborhoods. He encouraged the use of the creative new legislation we wrote in 1981, Section 7.3 of the city's zoning regulations, which offers

increased density and other bonuses in return for preserving historic buildings. To date, close to 50 buildings have been rehabilitated under this unique legislation, most of them in the SCDP's low-income, target areas. You can see the results of Tim's collaboration between preservationists and housing agencies all around the West Side, the South End, Waterside and the Downtown.

Despite his labors in Stamford, Tim always managed to take important roles in statewide organizations, among them Chairman of the Connecticut Historical Commission (later known as the Historic Preservation Council), a job he held for over fifteen years. We know that it will only be a matter of time before his retirement is "over," and he will be as busy as ever. We cannot thank him enough for his years of support. HNN

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Historic Neighborhood Preservation

The HNP is a non-profit, tax exempt 501(c)(3) organization dedicated since 1977 to the preservation of historic buildings. We would appreciate your help in achieving these goals.

Historic Neighborhood News

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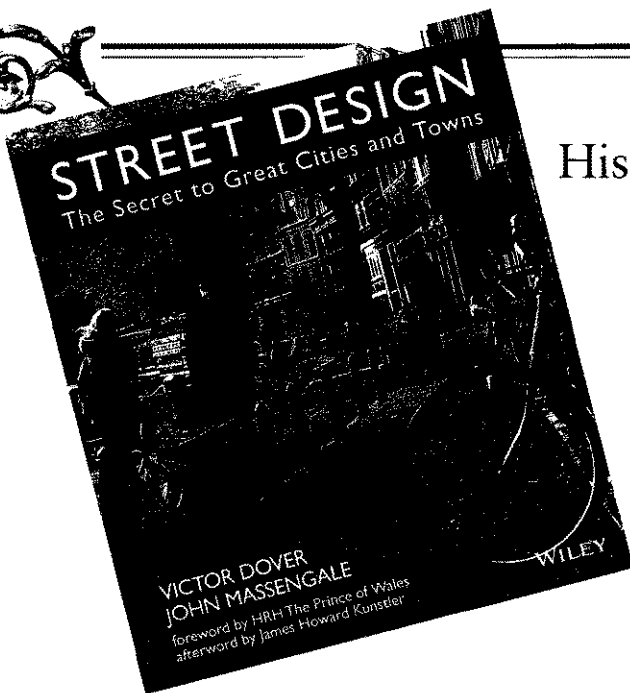
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The Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program, Inc., received support for this historic preservation project from the State Historic Preservation Office of the Department of Economic and Community Development with funds from the Community Investment Act of the State of Connecticut and is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development through the City of Stamford and its Stamford Community Development Office, David Martin, Mayor.

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Historic Neighborhood Preservation
Annual General Meeting
to Feature Talk by
Noted Architect/Planner
John Massengale:
“A Street Is A
Terrible Thing To Waste”

When: Thursday, October 30th, 6:00 - 8:30 PM
Where: Old Town Hall,
Corner of Atlantic and Main Streets

THE PUBLIC IS INVITED to attend Historic Neighborhood Preservation's Annual General Meeting, to be held at Stamford's recently refurbished landmark, Old Town Hall. Executive Director Wes Haynes will review the organization's accomplishments over the past year and its plans for the future. Mr. Haynes plans to honor retiring Stamford Community Development Program Director Tim Beeble, a longtime friend of preservation (see tribute on page 7).

The keynote speaker at the meeting will be John Massengale, author of *Street Design: the Secret to Great Cities and Towns*, published by John Wiley in 2014. Mr. Massengale knows how to fix America's neighborhoods, cities and towns and make them walkable again by creating streets that are more friendly and healthy. His book should be required

reading for every local political leader, planner, architect, real estate developer and engaged local citizen.

There is a voluntary donation for the meeting which will be followed by refreshments. Guests are encouraged to become members of Historic Neighborhood Preservation, a non-profit organization concerned with protecting Stamford's historic architecture and neighborhoods. HNN

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Ugly Building Contest

In our next issue, we will discuss why so many of Stamford's newer buildings are so gosh-darn UGLY! Please e-mail your nomination for the ugliest building in town, preferably with a photo, to Renée Kahn at rkahn@hnp.org and we will publish the best (worst?) of them!