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Buying into Downtown Revival: The Centrality of Retail to Postwar Urban Renewal in American Cities

By
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This article argues that the link between consumption and civic engagement has an important local, not just national, history and that retailers' involvement in the downtown urban renewal of American cities in the post-WWII era offers a particularly fruitful avenue of investigation. The article focuses on New Haven, Connecticut, and Boston, Massachusetts, where Edward J. Logue served as development chief from 1954 to 1967. His record over these fourteen years, when he was a national leader in federally funded urban renewal, offers a revealing case of how consumption and civic culture intersected at the local level. Although the power given to retailers varied starkly in the redevelopment of these two cities, in both cases department stores were deemed essential to the viability of the central business district. That priority ultimately limited the success of downtown revitalization, given the department store sector's growing suburban orientation and steady economic concentration from the 1960s on.

Keywords: downtown; urban renewal; department stores; retail; Edward J. Logue; New Haven; Boston

In September and October of 1947, 385,000 Philadelphians took the elevator to the fifth floor of Gimbel's flagship downtown department store with no purchase in mind. Instead, they came to view a massive "Better Philadelphia Exhibition" that had been a year and a half in the planning. Taking up two full floors and costing $340,000 (equivalent to about $840,000 in

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today's dollars), the exhibition, according to an admiring review in *The Architectural Forum*, used "every device known to the display artist" to show "what is wrong with Philadelphia and what, specifically, can be done about it." In an experience "strikingly reminiscent of the Futurama at the [New York] World's Fair," visitors encountered a huge 30 × 14 foot aerial photo map, where synchronized with a narration, sections of present-day Philadelphia flipped over to show proposed improvements; a diorama of an imagined "Better Philadelphia" in 1982; and three-dimensional models, murals, wall panels, and full-size replicas of an actual dingy street corner and a typical row house with a remodeled backyard garden. In one particularly compelling exhibit, "the shadow of blight" spread gradually over the heart of the city as a pendulum swung across a map of Philadelphia. Not only did Gimbel's Philadelphia store host the exhibition, it lent its vice president, Arthur Kaufman, to serve as an officer of the "Better Philadelphia" project, along with the president of the Citizens' Council on Planning, the president of the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, and the vice president of a major insurance company (who was also a descendent of the prominent eighteenth-century Philadelphian Dr. Benjamin Rush) ("Philadelphia Plans Again" 1947).

The deep investment of Gimbel's Department Store in the future viability of Philadelphia during the late 1940s may come as a surprise today. We live in an era when the total number of department stores is sharply decreasing, and the survivors are likely to be national chains unidentified with any local community, located in suburban and exurban malls rather than center cities. As recently as November 17, 2006, a *New York Times* front-page story predicting a comeback for department stores after four decades of decline made it clear that consumers were patronizing stores in suburban shopping centers, not downtown. Although we may associate Gimbel's with New York's Macy's, its once fierce competitor in Herald Square, in fact the store had deep Philadelphia roots. Adam Gimbel established his Philadelphia store in 1894, fourteen years before opening his New York City branch. And until it went out of business in 1984, Gimbel's remained a stalwart fixture among Philadelphia's major department stores, long sponsoring that city's Thanksgiving Day Parade the way Macy's did in New York ("Gimbel's," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gimbel's; see also Fischer n.d.).

Much of the literature on consumption and civic culture after World War II focuses on the national level, whether tracking the emergence of a mass-consumer-oriented postwar economy, the application of marketing techniques to political campaigns, or the embrace of socially conscious consumption. The case of department stores' involvement in the enormous effort by American cities to revitalize themselves after World War II—after fifteen years of urban stagnation accompanying the Great Depression and the war and in the face of the explosion of suburbanization that immediately followed—demonstrates that the link between consumption and civic engagement has an important local history as well.

One visitor who enthusiastically viewed the Better Philadelphia Exhibition on a trip back to his hometown went on to make a career of rebuilding cities. From 1954 until almost 1968, Philadelphia-born and Yale-educated Edward J. Logue was a pivotal figure in the urban renewal of two economically troubled northeastern cities, New Haven, Connecticut, and Boston. As the powerful development administrator in New Haven from 1954 to 1961, he pioneered many of the strategies of attracting federal funding for massive urban rebuilding that other cities would later imitate. Under the watch of Logue and his partner Mayor Richard Lee, New Haven received more federal money per capita than any other city in the United States, by 1965 more than two and a half times greater than the next highest, Newark, New Jersey (Rae 2003, 324). Applauded nationally for his talent at making big plans and finding others to pay for them, Logue caught the eye of new Boston Mayor John Collins, elected in 1959 with a promise to reverse the half-century stagnation of one of the nation's oldest cities. In 1961, Ed Logue became Development Administrator in Boston, armed with unprecedented centralized authority over the city's planning and redevelopment and compensated—at his demand—at a salary higher than any other public official in the state. When Logue moved on to a powerful new statewide position created for him by Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York in 1968, he left behind a fourteen-year record of overseeing urban renewal in two cities during the key years of federally funded and locally implemented urban renewal. In both of these cities, retail was a key component of the downtown renewal plan. Logue's legacy thus offers a unique opportunity to follow over a decade and a half the role that retailers like Gimbel's played in the successes and failures of urban renewal and thereby to probe the interconnection of private capital and public investment in the reconstruction of American cities in the postwar era.

Edward J. Logue was a pivotal figure in the urban renewal of two economically troubled northeastern cities, New Haven, Connecticut, and Boston.

In New Haven and Boston, as in most American cities, downtown department store owners and executives played central roles in urban renewal efforts, while their stores became important sites for redevelopment projects. From their founding in the late nineteenth century, department stores had been the lifeblood of downtown development—a destination for mass transit, an anchor for other commerce, a provider of jobs, an icon for the city. Beginning in the Great Depression and accelerating after World War II, however, the number of downtown stores steadily declined, their share of metropolitan shoppers and their dollars likewise shrinking (Friedan and Sagalyn 1997). When it became clear that the severe housing shortage facing the United States at the end of the war would be addressed through massive building of suburban dwellings, panic set in. How would the central business district fare as more city residents moved out? How should managers prioritize improvements in downtown "trunk" stores versus expansion through suburban "branches?" Still strongly identified with their home cities, department stores clamored for help sustaining downtown retail. They called for thousands more off-street parking spaces, the streamlining of traffic flow in congested retail centers, new roadways that sped shoppers directly from their suburban homes into downtown, improvements in mass transportation, slum clearance of "gray belt" neighborhoods bordering retail cores, and updated shopping environments that resembled the new modern malls beginning to appear in suburban rings. They also complained of high real estate taxes that overburdened them with costs that suburban stores did not share, aggravating the tax advantage already given to suburban stores beginning in 1954 for greater write-offs of accelerated depreciation on new construction than renovations of existing structures (Isenberg 2004, 166-202; Hanchett 1996). Richard C. Bond, president of John Wanamaker of Philadelphia, called his department store colleagues to arms in 1960: if America's great cities are not to become ghost towns, merchants "should be heading the list of dedicated, aroused and enlightened business leaders, for we have more at stake than perhaps any other group to see that our cities thrive rather than shrink and die." Only a multi-billion-dollar program of federal spending, Bond argued, can "check this urban erosion before it reaches catastrophic proportions" ("Pressure by Business Urged" 1960).

From their founding in the late nineteenth century, department stores had been the lifeblood of downtown development—a destination for mass transit, an anchor for other commerce, a provider of jobs, an icon for the city.

Understandably convinced of the wisdom of calls like Bond's to rebuild downtowns around dynamic retail with large, well-established department stores at its core, Ed Logue and Mayor Richard Lee made plans for the "model city" of New Haven accordingly. First, the New Haven Redevelopment Authority leveled the dilapidated Oak Street neighborhood adjoining downtown, inhabited by poor immigrants and blacks, to make room for a complex of luxury apartment towers and the "Oak Street Connector," an expansive highway extension designed to bring cars from the Connecticut Turnpike (Route 1/95) and later the state's new north-south Route 91 right into the city center. The thinking went that middle-class New Havenites would now have the option of modern living downtown or a quick trip back in if they insisted on moving to the suburbs.

New Haven's redevelopers then turned to their next big project: rebuilding downtown around a three-block commercial complex with two major department stores, an attached two-block-long fifteen-hundred-car garage designed by prominent architect and Yale Architecture School Dean Paul Rudolph, a modern three-hundred-room hotel, new up-to-date office space, and the Chapel Square Mall bordering the historic New Haven Green. What became known as the "Church Street Project" was the first federal urban renewal project to focus on a commercial district, and it was trendsetting in using federal dollars to restructure land use, parking, and traffic circulation in order to recentralize a region's retail activities in its major city's downtown core. A ninety-three-acre site of small stores and service establishments, many owned by Jewish and Italian immigrants or their descendants, was to be leveled to make way for the rebirth of downtown New Haven (Lowe 1967, 427-63; Talbot 1967, 116-35; Longstreth 2006, 11-13; Hardwick 1996; Garvin 2002, 160-61, 261-62; Sternlieb 1963, 111).

What became known as [New Haven's] "Church Street Project" was the first federal urban renewal project to focus on a commercial district.

But Lee and Logue's fantasies of creating a mini–Herald Square or Fifth Avenue or even nearby Hamden Plaza Shopping Center in downtown New Haven seriously misjudged what it would take to revitalize the city. So committed were the planners, politicians, and developers to attracting high-prestige retail to put New Haven back on the map that they overlooked the true base of New Haven retail, the small stores, personal services, restaurants, and professional offices downtown that created bustling sidewalk traffic and urban ambiance. With eyes focused on a total remaking of downtown New Haven as a regional retail center capable of competing with newly sprouting suburban malls, Logue and his colleagues made inadequate plans, indeed almost forgot to consider the relocation of small businesses until the new mall was ready. Only when a group of 120 small downtown merchants—hastily allied as the Central Civic Association to meet this sudden threat to their livelihoods—sued the city in 1958 were temporary quarters in prefabricated metal structures provided. Some stores moved in, while others—estimated at 20 percent—went out of business, unable to afford the transition costs and the long wait for permanent new quarters. Still others ironically moved out to the suburban shopping centers ("New Haven Offers Stand-By Sites" 1958).

The project's planners had vaguely assumed many small stores would come into the Chapel Square Mall when it was finished, but they made no allowance for how they would survive until then or find the capital to relocate in such expensive real estate, even with the 10 percent rental discount promised after the merchants protested. Most were renters who would not even get eminent domain compensation for the taking of their stores by the city. A letter sent to Mayor Lee by Leo S. Gilden, president of "Gilden's, Inc., Jewelers for Four Generations" and the president of the Central Civic Association, bitterly outlined the group's complaints: they had never been informed of the project before the public announcement; they were not even invited to the luncheon disclosing the plans to the public and "first learned of all this via radio and newspaper"; and they—as taxpayers and servers of the New Haven public for many years—took great offense at the mayor's statement "that you realize that perhaps some of the smaller businessmen could not survive this change but that in the long run the city would benefit by it." Reminding the mayor "that this is a democracy we live in," Gilden insisted that "certainly the livelihoods and welfare of the thousands of people involved in this must be considered before the interests of outside capital," referring to the project's New York developer Roger Stevens and the New York department store Lee hoped to attract (Logue 1957). One Church Street merchant, jeweler Robert R. Savitt, whose two-story property was slated for demolition at a compensation lower than he felt he deserved, embroiled the city in a major suit that delayed the entire project for a couple of years. By the fall of 1961, all that stood in the huge mud and rubble wasteland that had once been the heart of downtown New Haven was Rudolph's massive municipal garage—ultimately completed at a price tag of $6 million, twice what had been budgeted.

It also proved frustratingly more difficult than anyone had expected to line up the two anchor department stores. Although Edward Malley Company, the largest still-viable department store in downtown New Haven, had intended to remain in its original location facing the Green, adjacent to but not part of the Chapel Square Mall, its management was convinced to build a new store on a site closer to the Oak Street Connector and the parking garage, thus freeing its prime spot for a hotel. Malley's was already opening its new store in the fall of 1962 before Mayor Lee was finally able to announce triumphantly that he had at last found it a partner in Macy's, notably in time for the 1963 mayoral election. (Having watched his plurality over his Republican challenger dangerously decline to 4,000 votes in 1961 from almost 14,000 in 1959 with the delays in the Church Street Project, Lee was greatly relieved that delivering Macy's helped him win by 11,345 votes in the 1963 election [Powledge 1970, 42, 44, 46].) It had been a long, difficult search for a New York department store willing to move into downtown New Haven, even with the massive garage in place. Macy's, a store that was aggressively expanding into suburban shopping centers, ultimately agreed to the New Haven proposition in a calculation that this three-story, 320,000-square-foot store would give it a foothold in the Connecticut market, a part of the metropolitan New York area it had yet to enter. That Macy's managers felt a downtown store would enhance its suburban strategy attests to the power that the trunk-and-branches paradigm still held (Macy's 1964).

So convinced were New Haven's redevelopers of the superiority of suburban-type store design that in planning the new downtown they forgot what made the urban experience unique. Yes, shoppers could travel from highway to parking garage to a chosen department store floor without even entering the real city. But horizontal, sleek, modernist department stores and a mall designed around an interior central courtyard put up large, solid-wall exteriors, isolating customers inside and pedestrians and drivers outside on sidewalks and streets made much less interesting and safe. Very possibly, New Haven commerce would have declined anyway, given Connecticut's huge suburban growth and a tax structure that gave little relief to cities. But the New Haven urban renewers' unwavering vision for saving downtown by putting suburban-style, department-store-dominated retail at the center ignored—and ultimately destroyed—the true base of New Haven commerce, the small shops that an observer at the time noted were often loyally "supported by particular ethnic and racial groups." With the long project delays caused by the Savitt suit, the developer's difficulties securing financing, and the problem attracting a second department store, the Chapel Square Mall did not open until March 1967, a full decade after the project's announcement, giving New Haven–area consumers plenty of time to develop new suburban patterns of shopping. Soon it also became clear that the Oak Street Connector, designed to deliver shoppers to the doorstep of the downtown stores, could just as easily facilitate the exodus of middle-class New Haven residents. It became all the easier to live in the suburbs, work downtown, and shop near home where store hours were longer, parking was free and easy, and malls featured a convenient mix of small and large stores. Moreover, poorer, ethnically and racially diverse customers, who were increasingly dominating New Haven's population, found fewer and fewer attractions downtown as upscale shopping designed for wealthier suburbanites gradually replaced demolished stores.

So by the time Malley's closed in 1982, Macy's in 1993, and the Chapel Square Mall went into a fatal dive not long thereafter, there was little of the old New Haven urban fabric left to close over the huge hole ripped out of the city's heart. Talk once again turned to seeking department stores to fill the gap, prompting a longtime observer of the New Haven scene to deride the city for what he called its "Shartenberg Syndrome," referring to another local department store that had closed in 1962. Charging that "the department store was an unfortunate symbol for that longing [to feel] their city was special" and "distinctive," the syndrome "made city policymakers spend more than thirty years seeking downtown department stores as anchors for urban renewal." Driven by nostalgia rather than hard-headed realism, they used the department store "to re-create the past," he argued, rather than thinking creatively about a new kind of future for downtown New Haven (Bass n.d.).

Edward Logue took on the job of redeveloping Boston in 1961, having learned some important lessons in New Haven. When he left, six years after planning had begun on the Church Street Project and four years from its public announcement, downtown New Haven looked more, not less, abandoned. He thus made sustaining, even increasing, the number of white-collar jobs downtown his priority in Boston, recognizing that keeping workers in the city's core would bolster the retail and personal service economy along with the city's tax base, even if people moved their residences to the suburbs. Accordingly, the Government Center Project—a sixty-acre complex of federal, state, and municipal headquarters and private commercial space built on the site of Scollay Square, Boston's former red-light district—became the jewel in Boston's urban renewal crown. Aware that the federal and state governments were willing to build new office towers somewhere in downtown Boston, the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) conceived, with the planning expertise of architect I. M. Pei, of a campus of government buildings in which a new city hall would be the centerpiece. A massive concentration of public employees in the center of Boston—in Government Center alone, twenty-five thousand where there previously had been six thousand—promised to provide a ready market for downtown retail ranging from department stores to restaurants. By design, the project's centerpiece—the enormous and architecturally acclaimed Kallman, McKinnell & Knowles Boston City Hall—had no cafeteria or dining hall within it, to force employees to leave the premises and patronize local restaurants and other businesses. The physical renovation of the city's retail district may not have explicitly been the BRA's top priority, but ensuring the survival of downtown commerce certainly was high on its list (O'Connor 1993; Garvin 2002, 88-90).

Logue delegated the task of planning the structural modernization of Boston's downtown shopping district to a group of local businessmen recruited for the purpose, organized in 1962 as the Committee for the Central Business District, Inc., or CCBD. The committee was headed by veteran civic leader Charles A. Coolidge, a Boston Brahmin senior partner in the prominent law firm of Ropes and Gray and former head of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce. On its Executive Board sat the chairmen of the two major department stores, Jordan Marsh and Filene's, and the president of Boston's third largest, Gilchrist's. Gun-shy from the traumas of his New Haven experience, Logue let the retailers recommend to the BRA how dramatic the redevelopment should be, the most desirable mix of large and small stores, and solutions to the sticky problem of temporary relocations. Blessed with a financially healthier group of retailers in Boston's larger market, Logue began by asking the CCBD's members to pay for a major study of the central business district's problems and feasible solutions, which would later make applying for federal redevelopment funds easier. CCBD members came up with a quarter million dollars to hire famed commercial architect and urban planner Victor Gruen as well as a Washington economist, Robert

Gladstone, to estimate potential growth in the downtown Boston market (Logue 1962-1967).

In his treatise of 1964, *The Heart of Our Cities; The Urban Crisis: Diagnosis and Cure*, Gruen enthused about the "pattern of cooperation" between Boston's CCBD and the BRA. No stranger himself to the kind of internecine conflicts that had wracked cities like New Haven and Fort Worth, Texas, where he had struggled unsuccessfully to win adoption of his own ambitious, futuristic city plan, Gruen took great comfort in the city and citizen committee's agreement "that whatever is planned and implemented must be acceptable to both parties" (pp. 321-26; see also Hardwick 2004, 166-92). Likewise, the *Boston Herald* remarked on Logue's uncharacteristic handling of planning for the retail core, commenting that his statements and actions revealed "a caution untypical of his usual drive to get things done, now if not sooner," as if there was "a 'proceed cautiously' sign on the central business district so as to disrupt its operations as little as possible" (Saint 1965). Logue admitted as much to his BRA board chairman, Monsignor Francis Lally, in a progress report shortly before the CCBD was announced. Promising that all the pieces would soon be in place to begin "planning for the retail core," Logue acknowledged that it had taken longer than he would have liked "but I think the result has been to get support and depth from the retailers" (Logue 1962).

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In *The Heart of Our Cities*, Gruen (1964, 321) also touted the CCBD's broad base, "embrac[ing] in its membership retail establishments of all types and sizes, including Jordan Marsh Company and Wm. Filene's Sons Co., real estate owners, utility companies, banks, newspaper publishers, hotel operators, restaurateurs, movie house operators, and others." While representatives from a wide range of businesses sat on the full seventy-five-member CCBD, in reality the department stores, particularly the chiefs of Filene's and Jordan Marsh, controlled the powerful CCBD Executive Committee. According to an influential 1964 article in *Fortune* assessing the prospects for urban redevelopment in

Boston, "Boston: What Can a Sick City Do?" Walter McQuade described the CCBD as dominated by the chief executives of Jordan Marsh and Filene's. "These two mighty merchants put their renowned rivalry aside temporarily and together made the round of the stores, the banks, the newspapers, and other businesses in the area 'hat in hand' . . . and came back with a good hatful of funds—$250,000—for replanning the whole district" (p. 166). Indeed, these two major department stores remained very identified with the city, even as both had begun expanding into suburban branch stores, though with different strategies: Jordan's spread its branches at some distance from the CBD to preserve its flagship store's business, while Filene's built within the inner ring and sacrificed downtown sales (Sternlieb 1962, 162-70).

Boston's retailers may have had deep pockets and that "depth" of commitment to downtown renewal that Logue remarked on to Monsignor Lally, but they also were extremely cautious about change, aware of the damage that dislocations like New Haven's urban redevelopment could have on city-based retail business, already losing its stronghold on metropolitan sales. When Gruen's preliminary planning called for constructing a multilevel mall from Government Center all the way along the main shopping fare of Washington Street and another traverse mall from Tremont Street to South Station—in essence incorporating blocks of the city's core into a central shopping structure—Coolidge, speaking for his Executive Committee, protested the proposal as "too big, too much." Instead, the CCBD sent Gruen back to the drawing board to come up with a more modest plan providing for an underground truck delivery system, some exclusively pedestrian areas, the improvement of traffic circulation through straightening several key streets and making them one-way, the addition of more parking garages, the establishment of a few new store sites in place of ones considered substandard, and the possible commercial development of the South Station property. When making a westbound thoroughfare required the taking of the budget-priced Raymond's Department Store at the corner of Franklin and Washington, great concern was expressed about how best to house Raymond's and other smaller enterprises temporarily. Over and over at the unveiling of the plans for downtown revitalization in May 1967, Mayor Collins, BRA Board Chairman Monsignor Lally, and CCBD President Charles Coolidge reiterated the strength of this plan for "propos[ing] changes which are dramatic, but which . . . are not too disruptive to business within the district. The retailer's business must continue or else the retailer may be forced out of business by his customers going elsewhere" ("Four Hundred Million Plan for Downtown Revitalization" 1967, 412). Boston's plan was a far cry from Logue's oversight of the total demolition of New Haven's downtown retail core. The most drastic proposals called for a pedestrian mall in the heart of the retail district, which later proved problematic, and a raised walkway above Summer Street from South Station all the way to the Boston Common, which was never constructed ("Four Hundred Million Plan for Downtown Revitalization" 1967, 409-12; BRA 1967a; BRA 1967b, 34-45).

Despite all the care that Logue took to involve the major retail players in the planning process and not to disrupt downtown commerce, the viability of

Boston's central business district continued to diminish. To some extent, conventional midprice downtown department stores were eclipsed everywhere, first by branches in suburban malls and then, starting in the 1960s, by a segmentation of the consumer market with the growth of discount department stores for price-conscious buyers (usually located in the suburbs), on one hand, and high-end specialty and department stores for the affluent (sometimes downtown), on the other (Bluestone et al. 1981, 18-27). The latter phenomenon might have bolstered Boston's central shopping district had not another component of Boston's urban renewal program—initiated before Logue arrived, but pushed by him to completion—undercut it. The first step in the commercial urban redevelopment of Boston had taken place under Mayor Collins's predecessor, John Hynes, in the late 1950s. On the heels of the West End fiasco, where a forty-eight-acre working-class residential neighborhood labeled as "blighted" and "slum" was bulldozed for luxury high-rise apartments aimed at keeping the middle class in the city (and then left leveled for years awaiting their construction), Hynes sought a site free of controversy. He fixed on abandoned rail yards located between the city's Back Bay and South End neighborhoods and near Copley Square as the ideal location for a major retail and office complex, what eventually became the Prudential Center. Although "the Pru" did not threaten downtown on its own, it became the core of a thriving, upscale shopping district around Newbury Street in the Back Bay, dominated by expensive specialty stores and restaurants located on a traditional urban street grid (Sternlieb 1962, 111).

As the satellite Prudential–Back Bay area flourished, affluent consumers found less and less reason to shop in the old retail core, particularly since the downtown department stores were disappearing, not only into the suburbs but also into each other. Beginning in the 1960s and accelerating in the 1980s and 1990s, existing national retail holding companies like Federated Department Stores, Allied Stores Corporation, the May Department Stores Company, and Dayton-Hudson Corporation began aggressively acquiring more stores and then merging among themselves, leaving behind abandoned brick and mortar corpses in cities throughout the country (Friedan and Sagalyn 1997, 78-86). Even as Boston prospered in the 1980s and 1990s as a corporate center, retail in the old downtown declined. The Back Bay shopping district thrived, though over time specialty chains increasingly replaced independently owned stores, making it less distinguishable from an upscale mall. Today, Boston's old central business district, now known as "Downtown Crossing," remains home to only one traditional department store, the national chain of Macy's, as the result of repeated retail consolidations. Jordan Marsh became Macy's in 1996; and just this past year, Macy's parent company, Federated, bought Filene's and converted all surviving stores to Macy's as part of a $17 billion takeover of regional chains to create a vast national retail empire of more than eight hundred stores. Although Boston's central retail core is certainly prospering more than New Haven's—where the closest thing today to a department store is the Yale Coop, run by Barnes & Noble—it is once again causing anxious hand-wringing by the present mayor and his BRA. "Makeover for 'Tired' District" read a *Boston Globe* headline on

September 8, 2006, announcing the city's hiring of yet another consulting firm to devise strategies for revitalizing Downtown Crossing. Poor and moderate-income consumers without easy access to suburban discount stores and unable to afford the Back Bay shops have been the mainstay of Downtown Crossing, but here, as previously in New Haven, they are not seen as a desirable solution to the latest downtown crisis. Rather, the thousands of white-collar workers downtown and the future upper-class residents of new luxury condos being planned nearby are Mayor Thomas Menino's preferred target audience. Sound familiar?

What can we learn from this tale of downtown urban renewal in New Haven and Boston? Several conclusions are worth noting. Although redevelopment administrator Edward Logue brought experience from one city to his work in another and changed his strategies along the way, giving retailers a greater role in Boston than they had had in New Haven, in both cases department stores were viewed as the solution to downtown's ills. As major commercial developer James Rouse put it, in discussing his frustrating eight-year struggle to redevelop the center of Norfolk, Virginia, in the mid- to late 1960s, "There was no alternative [to the department store as anchor], at least in anybody's mind" (Friedan and Sagalyn 1997, 81). But whether it was professional planners, Washington bureaucrats, or local businessmen doing the betting during the 1950s and 1960s, it seems that they put their money on a vulnerable horse. Department stores' insistence on suburban-style store designs often undermined the uniqueness of the urban experience and encouraged the construction of enormous, self-contained, superblock projects that were rarely adaptable to other purposes should the need arise. That inflexibility proved increasingly problematic as the department store sector underwent extraordinary restructuring over the decades that followed. Tragically, while urban planners and policy makers focused their efforts and public money on making downtown districts more appealing to consumers, economic decisions in board rooms far outside their control were ultimately shaping events, whether it was disinvesting in downtown stores in the 1960s or consolidating local and regional stores into a smaller number of identical national chain outlets in the 1990s. Meanwhile, smaller merchants who had managed to survive the lack of interest and support of urban renewers in the 1950s and 1960s found themselves struggling against the rapid expansion of specialty chains in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

In 2006, as in 1947 when Philadelphians flocked to the "Better Philadelphia Exhibition," commerce provides a major base to any city's economy and vitality, just as consumption figures significantly in the nation's GDP. Like it or not, prosperity in our postindustrial American society depends on consumption of goods and services. I would hope that this history of retail and urban renewal suggests that cities make critically important decisions when they favor some merchants and retail environments over others. The cases of downtown New Haven and Boston testify to the importance of preserving a mix of commerce and a diversity of consumers to protect cities from falling victim to the internal restructuring of any one commercial sector or the shifting loyalties of any particular group of consumers.

But we may draw a deeper lesson about the way governments and corporations have been entwined in shaping the urban built environment. As federal urban renewal took shape from the 1950s through the early 1970s, that public-private partnership between city planners and downtown merchants became a major component of the redevelopment formula all over the country. Enormous amounts of federal, state, and local dollars all went toward buttressing old, and creating new, infrastructure to support downtown commerce. This huge public investment, however, did not keep the tax code from favoring new suburban mall construction or major retailers from ultimately reneging on that partnership by abandoning downtown stores and engaging in mergers and acquisitions that fundamentally changed the physical landscape of postwar retail. Much as it was with the building of the railroads across the continent in nineteenth-century America, the age of urban renewal gave deep public roots to the flowering of private capital in the realm of commerce. The advocates of urban renewal may have miscalculated what was possible in reviving downtowns, but we might rightfully ask what obligation these retail corporations had—and still have—to the urban citizens whose tax dollars have underwritten their postwar development.

I have written elsewhere about how, over the course of the post–World War II era, Americans came to live in a Consumers' Republic (Cohen 2003). While that may be the inescapable reality, we nonetheless retain some choice about where it is located, how it looks and feels physically, and which consumer citizens are invited to participate.

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