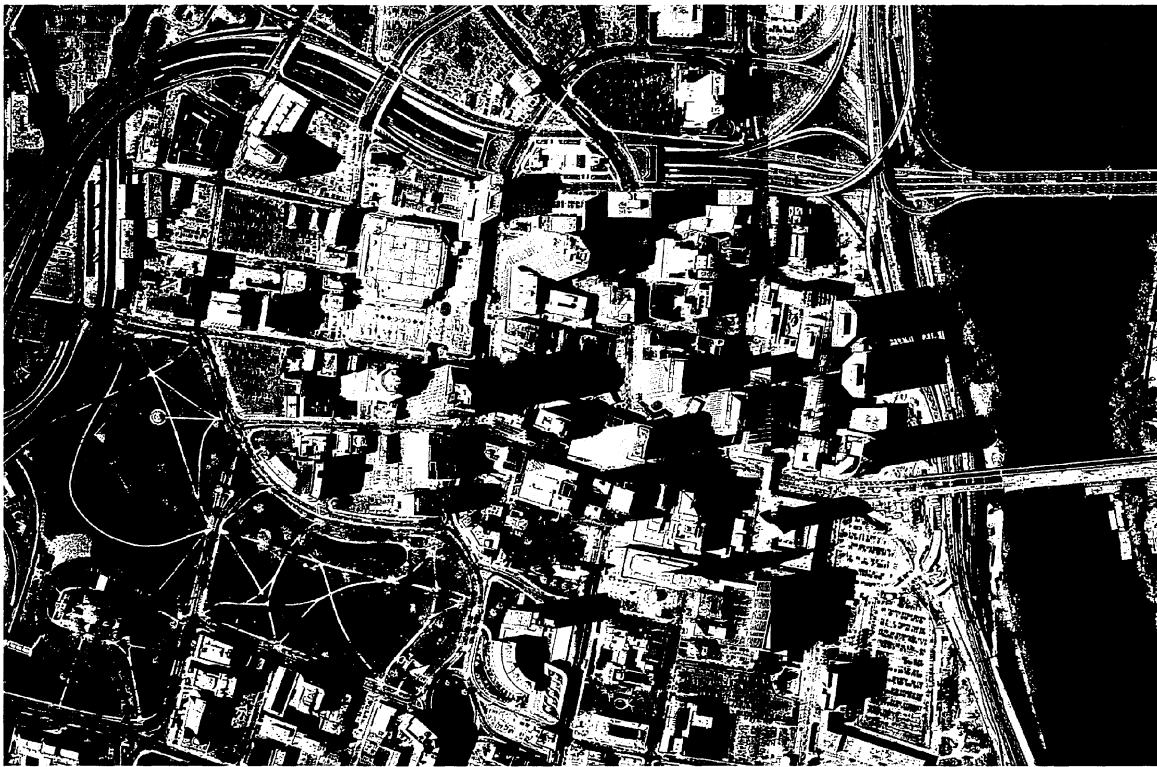


Forward:

Hartford at Its Heart

by Tony Hiss

There were times, during the fiercely anti-urban decades after World War II, when it seemed as though hundreds of American cities might simply disappear. This hasn't happened, despite a full half-century of massive federal disinvestment, explosive suburban sprawl, and unthinking highway construction programs that chopped many cities into strangely shaped, dysfunctional fragments.



Interstates 84 and 91 slice through downtown Hartford

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Instead, on the verge of a new century, it looks like America's cities will thrive again and once more become shining lights, places of strength and hope. Why is this? Primarily because so many Americans - urbanites, their suburban neighbors, business leaders, developers, investors, non-profit groups, and responsible government officials at all levels - are now banding together (slowly in some areas, more rapidly in others) to insist that cities have a permanently important part to play in this country's future.

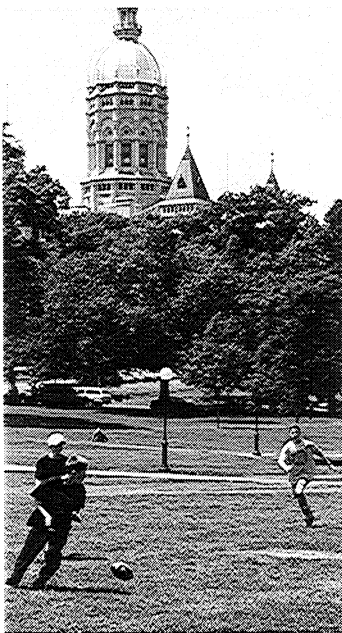
For one thing, we've now learned - probably in the nick of time - why cities matter so much. Beginning in 1961 with Lewis Mumford's monumental The City in History and Jane Jacobs' brilliantly insightful The Death and Life of Great American Cities, a full generation of modern studies have convincingly established that cities may be humanity's greatest and most continuously rewarding early invention. While agriculture gave humanity its first moments of security and stability, and the wheel allowed us to move around faster and farther afield, the city has permanently accelerated our minds.

The math of it is rough, but inescapable - each person we meet up with in the course of a day can show us, simply during casual conversation, up to, say, 100 new thoughts and points-of-view we never considered before or actions we never noticed. So: 100 encounters = 10,000 possibilities; and 1,000 glimpses into other lives = 100,000 potentially nourished brain synapses. Evolution in action - or a comfortable setting for it, at least - right before our very eyes.

Very stimulating and, just as often, delightful. Cities can address all our senses, intensifying and fine-tuning information, so they offer at each step and at every turn a change of pace, an interplay of new colors, unexpected reflections, and dramatically revealed vistas to look at; sudden rushes of sound, quiet nooks, fountains, children's laughter, footfalls; the smells of bread baking, coffee roasting, final preparations for lunch and dinner. Busy-ness and pause. It's *hurry up* now, and then *linger* later on. In a city, there are so many concurrent moments and patterns to be observed and sampled, that whatever you're up to, you're always doing more than one thing at a time.

The classic Greeks called cities the best schools in the world. Go about your everyday business, they said - shopping, strolling in parks, sitting on juries. Over time this offered an education in what it means to be human that no book or university could hope to duplicate.

One contemporary historian, Gunther Barth, of the University of California, has suggested that modern American democracy might never have come into being if our 19th-century cities hadn't shown American farmers and European immigrants how to live and work together -



Bushnell Park is the setting for the State Capitol and serious afternoon football.

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apartment houses created neighbors; department stores brought people downtown with a common purpose; ballparks taught the rules of competition and cooperation; newspapers offered an information base; and vaudeville theaters held up a mirror so people could laugh at themselves and their troubles.

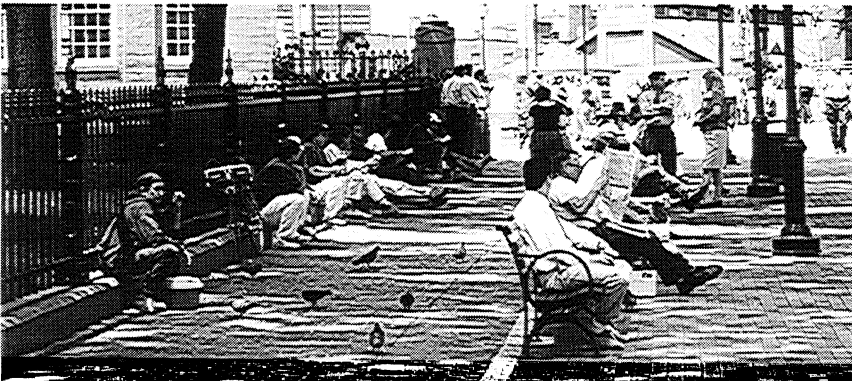
Barth might well have mentioned city parks, too. One of Hartford's greatest native sons, Frederick Law Olmsted, saw that America's new city dwellers also desperately needed common ground - places of beauty where, despite differences, people could come together as fellow citizens and celebrate their common humanity. Some of Olmsted's insights came from his childhood pastor, the Rev. Horace Bushnell, of Hartford, who, in 1854, even before Olmsted designed his first park (Central Park, in New York), persuaded the citizens of Hartford to purchase land for Bushnell Park, the city's central anchor and defining grace for the last century and a half.



Frederick
Law
Olmsted

Equally important are Hartford's ancestors, the men and women whose hundreds of years of efforts made Hartford into a city that, by the turn of the 20th century, stood among the best of the best.

There are, in addition, a host of other compelling reasons for cities to come alive: businesses can thrive and be innovative and feed one another when they exist in close proximity; irreplaceable natural resources, such as land and water, are used more sparingly by people who live and work in the same area; large communities can immeasurably enrich their own experiences because they can afford world class arts and performance institutions; suburban communities in metropolitan regions falter when their central cities stumble, and prosper fully only when these cities have once again found their way.



City life feeds off itself, creating synergistic opportunities for business, recreation and the creation of communities

Even as we're learning why we crave wonderful cities, we have to get better - often on a crash course basis - at taking care of them: protecting them, healing them, cherishing them, making them work for everyone. Too frequently in the past, even successful cities were lopsided affairs, disfigured by bands of slums and acres of drabness and environmental degradation, all too easily torn apart by crime, racial and ethnic tension,

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and marked by despair on the part of those mired in poverty and a lack of caring by those gifted with the means to reach out.

Fellow feeling and *patience* - those are the new watchwords. Cities that work are enduring partnerships. They come into being, grow, and last, whenever the totality of a community - all parties and interests and viewpoints - find a way to trust one another and work together to build something that will outlast anyone in the room. The second lesson learned (once only a platitude, now a painfully acknowledge reality) is that no city can be built, or re-built, in a day. Not Rome, not New York, not Hartford.



Downtown Hartford represents centuries of investment, providing the city with a legacy of enduring assets.

Which means that no single project, however gargantuan, can re-make a city. But any project that thinks about the city as well as about itself can be an essential stepping stone. Any project is a success when it works, and also (1) it makes people feel better about the city; and (2) it leads on to another city-enhancing project. Each project can be a partner to all the projects that follow.

Cities are harder to kill off than they look, and have far more friends than are visible to the naked eye (which sounds like the opposite of urban paranoia). Who are Hartford's friends? There are several powerful groups at work. The many efforts of many citizens of the city and its neighboring towns - in re-investment, in parks restoration, in re-capturing the riverfront for public use - have already created a climate where a once-again-wonderful Hartford has begun to seem real to tens of thousands of people. Subsequent hard work, thoughtfulness, vision, and determination have made this present "Action Strategy" a practical blueprint for immediately reclaiming much of downtown, and for creating lasting progress over the next five to fifteen years.



The Traveler's Building recalls an earlier era of sophisticated urban architecture

Equally important are Hartford's ancestors, the men and women whose hundreds of years of efforts made Hartford into a city that, by the turn of the 20th century, stood among the best of the best. Before World War I, Hartford was the wealthiest city per capita in America - and, wisely and innovatively, used its immense wealth to enlarge and embellish the lives of its citizens. Mark Twain called Hartford "the best built and handsomest town I have ever seen" when he made it his home. During the famous "Rain of Parks," in 1894 and 1895, the city acquired more than 1330 acres of new parkland within fifteen months (lovely Bushnell Park is only 40 acres).

Even though Hartford during its first period of greatness never finished its work - there were to have been parkways, for instance, that Olmsted and his sons envisaged as direct connectors from downtown to the large new parks at the city's edge - the vast park system that flowered after the rain, along with the city's many other permanent endowments (it is the home

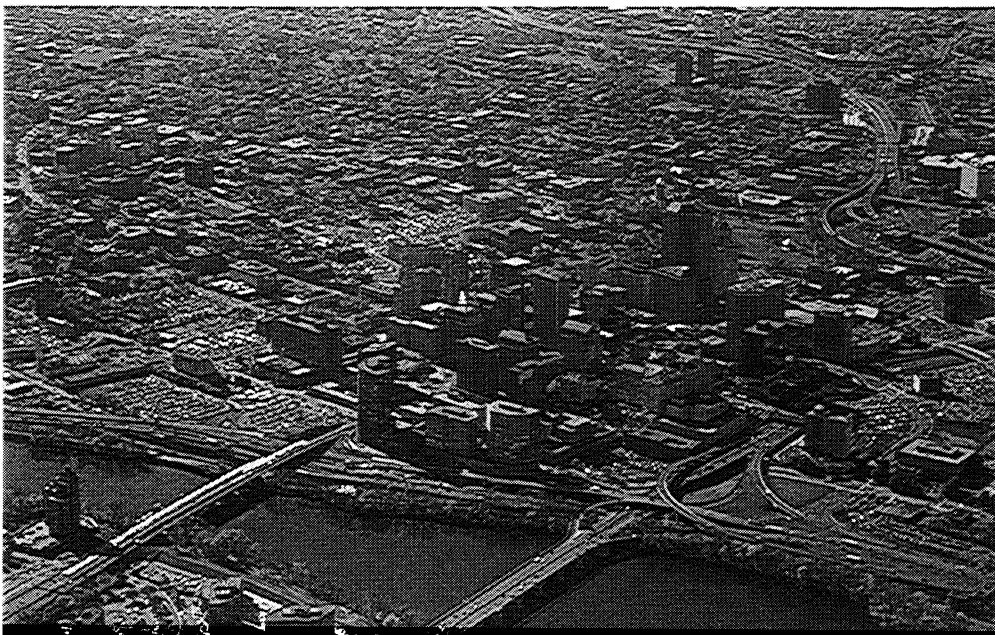
of the country's oldest, continuously-published newspaper and the first public art museum) are the strength, the treasure, the compass points, and the sacred structure that held the city firmly to its purposes throughout the uprooting storms that followed World War II.

Now a new group of Hartford friends is emerging - from far away. Within the next few years, the city will become a central stopping point along the new East Coast Greenway, a long-distance hiking and biking trail planned for fifteen states that, as "the urban equivalent of the Appalachian Trail," as it's already calling itself, will link cities, towns, and countryside from Maine to Florida.

Like so many American cities, Hartford is no longer a place that exists by itself. In Hartford's case, it has become the center of an expanding, diverse metropolitan region that is home to more than a million people. It's a region that needs a heart, a focus, a common ground for celebrations, for cultural enrichment, for having fun - for the urban pleasures and deeply rewarding experiences that human beings still crave and that only cities can provide. Half the region still works in downtown Hartford - but can the downtown, which now feels disconnected from the region and even from the city itself, rebalance so that it becomes a place where office workers, residents, and visitors all feel equally welcomed and at home?

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Ten years ago, no one could have answered that question *yes*, at least not with certainty. Nowadays the work is eminently do-able, and is already underway in a score of American cities - places where people have believed in their cities and have been rolling up their sleeves to get the job done.



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