Urban Renewal, the 15th Ward, the Empire Stateway and the City of Syracuse, New York

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Urban Renewal, the 15th Ward, the Empire Stateway and the City of Syracuse, New York

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Abstract

Urban renewal programs of the 1950s through 1970s coupled with the connection of older cities to the federal Interstate Highway system during the same time dramatically changed the look of those cities. Syracuse, New York is a perfect example city from which we can examine the impact – good and bad – of these developments and the effects they had.

Syracuse’s projects centered in and near the 15th Ward, a predominantly lower-income neighborhood situated north of the Syracuse University campus and east of Downtown Syracuse. This neighborhood of nearly 3,500 people would fall nearly completely between the different renewal programs and the construction of Interstate 81, the Empire Stateway.

From the late 1950s to the early years of Lee Alexander’s tenure as mayor of Syracuse in the 1970s, this is an examination of the failures at renewal and at stemming the exodus of city residents to the suburbs as Syracuse declined by over 25,000 people during that period.
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Capstone Thesis

1956 ushered in the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, the start of a new era spanning nearly two decades that dramatically changed the face of the United States. Its decree: the construction of a massive system of high-speed modern thoroughfares crossing the United States. The act spurred major changes in development patterns and brought new attention and focus to inner cities that they would traverse. While the construction of these highways contributed greatly to the growth and success of newer cities, many challenges were faced when connecting older cities (such as those in the Northeast) to the highway system.

Recognizing the challenge of adapting older cities to these new expressways as well as the blight inherent in an older city, community governments used federal urban renewal grants established under the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 to clear blighted areas. These cleared areas would form rights-of-way for new highways and allow modern buildings to be constructed, thus “renewing” cities trying to stem the flight of their citizens who were taking their taxes with them to the suburbs. The city of Syracuse in upstate New York was no exception to this method.
This is an examination of the modernization movements that dominated Syracuse in the 1960s and early 1970s, along with their successes and failures.

Many of Syracuse’s urban renewal projects happened within a neighborhood designated as the 15th Ward. Bounded1 (roughly) by Erie Boulevard to the north, Irving and University Avenues and Pine Street to the east, East Adams and Burt Streets to the south, and Montgomery Street to the west, the 15th Ward was a community just east of the Central Business District and just northwest of Syracuse University. Pictures from the 1950s depict an older and “sub-standard” run-down community. Streets were lined with mostly two-family homes, in various states of disrepair and neglect. Many articles referred to the area as “a Slum Area,”2 home to lower-income people and the highest crime rates3 in Syracuse.

The 15th Ward would give way almost completely under three urban renewal proposals and the construction of Interstate 81. A detailed map from 1958 which shows the projects that would drastically change Syracuse is included as an appendix.

The first of these urban renewal proposals was for the expansion of downtown Syracuse. At the time, the majority of

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1 See appendix map for detailed boundaries.
2 Ganley, Joseph V. “Stateway Elevation Fear Unfounded.” (Syracuse Herald-American, 27 Apr 1958)
3 No hard data was available, but time editorials as well as retrospective ones depict it as such.
downtown activity still revolved around the central business district, along South Salina and South Warren Streets, west of the 15th Ward. With the Community Plaza proposal and other parts of the Central Business District renewal plan, the new downtown would reach as far as the route of the new Interstate Highway, nearly doubling downtown’s footprint and presenting passers-by a clean, modern downtown.

The eastern areas of the 15th Ward fell under the latter two portions. Buildings in the middle would be demolished nearly completely for the construction of the Empire Stateway, and the easternmost third of the Ward would nearly completely be demolished under the Near East Side Redevelopment Plan.

In the early 1950s, the states of New York and Pennsylvania began discussing a north-south highway that would run from Pennsylvania to Canada through the center of New York State. Talks progressed further with the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, which forced the creation of interstate highway plans by each state. Under a variety of names (Empire Stateway, Rt. 11 Northway, and Penn-Can Highway, among others), what would become Interstate Highway 81

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4 Interstate 81 was originally designated Interstate 505, prior to the final numbering convention. Original construction signs showed a combination of the two numberings, although it was numbered 81 at its official opening.
(henceforth “Stateway”) would follow the path of U.S. Highway 11 through Pennsylvania up to Binghamton, then either follow U.S. Highway 12 through Utica and then on to Watertown, or continue following U.S. 11 through Syracuse to Watertown. The U.S. 12 route was quickly decided against, in light of the much larger population in Syracuse and the connected higher traffic volumes.

The first section of the Stateway built within the Syracuse city limits stretched from the northern city limit to just north of Downtown, at East Willow Street (just north of what is now Interstate 690). For the stretch between there and the southern city limit, there were two proposed routes, with two different methods. The original plan was to sink the highway below street level alongside Townsend Street. The later (and current) solution was to use the nearby Almond Street arterial and to elevate the highway, leaving Almond Street below it (a similar below-grade highway solution was considered there as well).

The city Stateway segment encountered much resistance. The highway was planned to go through an existing neighborhood and required the use of eminent domain. Arguments ensued over what constituted proper compensation for the property being taken. Proposals to elevate or to depress the highway generated much

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5 From Nedrow, south of Syracuse, through to Downtown, U.S. Highway 11 is made up of South Salina and South Townsend Streets.
controversy, also. Studies indicated\(^6\) that the costs would increase significantly if the highway were depressed, because of the significant drainage problems and the geology of the area.

Another project proposed during this time within the 15\(^{th}\) Ward (and including the depressed original path of the Stateway) was a Community Plaza. Sandwiched between South State and Townsend Streets to the east and west, and East Genesee and Harrison Streets to the north and south, the Plaza was envisioned a grandiose governmental and cultural plaza. Proposed by then-Mayor Anthony A. Henninger, the plaza would consist of a large community courtyard surrounded by new government buildings such as a new ten-story city hall, a new art museum and a new police headquarters. Some were built, others were not; the plaza itself was built, as was the museum (the Everson Museum of Art) and the public safety building.

The Stateway wasn’t the only highway proposed to go through the city limits. The East-West highway (Interstate 690), constructed in the late 1960s on old elevated railroad tracks, cut just north of the northern border of the 15\(^{th}\) Ward. As the structures were mostly in place for this already, much less controversy was encountered in building it through the city limits.

\(^6\) Ganley, Joseph V. “Depressed Grade Stateway Hinges on Drainage Problem.” (The Post-Standard, 17 Aug 1958)
Finally, while the 15th Ward was the one most changed by the urban renewal projects of the 1960s, it was far from the only city area affected by urban renewal. Other projects, including several covering the southwest quadrant of the city and the Central Business District itself, similarly dramatically changed the fabric of those neighborhoods and had all been completed fully, certainly would have left us with a very different Syracuse than the one which exists today.

Now that the various components have briefly been introduced, it is time to examine them individually in more detail. We’ll begin this with the construction of the Empire Stateway.

**The Great Divide**

Originally proposed in the early 1950s, the Penn-Can Highway became part of New York’s master highway plan and was all but assuredly going to be routed through Central New York’s largest city (and fastest-growing metropolitan area, at the time), Syracuse. Segments were completed on both sides of the city limits long before the segment we will cover here was, as the path was straightforward, mostly rural, and encountered much less resistance.

The first segment of the highway to be constructed within the city limits spanned from Brewerton into the northern end of downtown Syracuse, and opened on October 28, 1959. At that time, according to District Department of Transportation Engineer Earle E.
Towlson, the remaining stretch through the city would “be under design very soon.” A few years earlier, in an interview with the Syracuse Herald-Journal, Towlson had indicated, “Through Syracuse, the expressway would be tied in with the city’s arterial routes.”

The original path of the Stateway was to follow the Townsend Street arterial, extending south from the terminus of the already finished northern segment at East Willow Street. The Almond Street arterial path, upon which the final highway was constructed, according to Towlson, initially was “discarded … because such a route would have eliminated a portion of the Pioneer Homes housing project.”

Following the Townsend Street arterial would have placed the highway closer to the Central Business District. Originally planned to be a depressed (below ground-level) highway, the highway would pass below parts of the Community Plaza (which will be discussed as its own portion later), and link up to East Willow Street six blocks to the north.

A preliminary report on the drainage situation for depressing the highway down the Townsend Street arterial indicated that the highway, through downtown, could not be depressed more than 11

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8 “Air Surveys to Fix North-South Route” (Syracuse Herald-Journal, 19 May 1955)
9 “Empire Stateway Link Shifted to Almond St.” (The Post-Standard, 22 Oct. 1958)
10 Ganley, “Stateway Hinges on Drainage”
feet if standard draining techniques were employed. Relocation of existing sewer systems would also be required, at a then-estimated cost of nearly two and a half million dollars. It would also require the Community Plaza elements straddling the expressway to clear it by nine feet above ground. Problems were also noted with East Genesee Street, a major east-west arterial (designated New York Route 92), and creating sufficient clearance with a bridge over the planned route. Depressing the highway would have caused many problems and significantly increased the cost of the project\textsuperscript{11}. Not surprisingly, an alternate route and method was selected.

The Almond Street arterial upon which the highway was constructed initially had been decided against for not only the reason above but for the impact it would have on the development of the State University of New York’s (SUNY) Upstate Medical University complex which was to be constructed immediately adjacent to it along East Adams Street. SUNY officials had previously (and unsuccessfully) petitioned the city to close East Adams Street, a major arterial which received instead an exit from the Stateway, as it passed through the Upstate complex, for congestion concerns.

\textsuperscript{11} The drainage concern, as well as the reconfiguration of major trunk sewer lines buried under Almond Street at the time, would have significantly increased the cost. No hard data was available; estimates ranged from eight to 10 times the cost of elevated bridges.
Evidence suggests that a similar study to the Townsend Street study was undertaken to consider depressing the expressway through the Almond Street routing as well, and was discarded as a result of the same challenges – increased cost and complications with certain major routes for overpasses and exits. Towlson declared that “it would be ‘more prudent’ to construct the new Almond St. arterial as an elevated, rather than as a depressed highway … the city has expensive sewer installations underground along the Almond St. route which would be affected if it was decided to depress the new arterial.”

The depressed expressway model had been championed by then-Mayor Henninger (for whom the high school on the north side is named). Many members of the community feared that the elevated design would lead to an ugly “China Wall” Henninger did however throw his support behind the elevated Almond Street routing and it would be built in that fashion. Ultimately, the decision was made for an elevated expressway along the Almond Street route with Almond Street itself passing below the expressway for the majority of the downtown section.

The challenges in site selection were far from the end of the project’s many setbacks and delays. While the expressway would

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12 “Empire Stateway Link Shifted to Almond St.” (The Post-Standard, 22 Oct. 1958)
13 “Stateway Link Shifted” The “China Wall” naming referred to China’s Great Wall and how the Stateway would close off the inner city and “stunt expansion” of Downtown Syracuse.
officially open, save the segment from Nedrow to East Willow Street, in 1962, the remaining segment would suffer many setbacks and not be opened until 1969.

It was generally regarded, according to newspaper articles published at the time, that the area was dilapidated and most residents weren’t objecting to the proposed path and construction. However, many objected to the methods used in obtaining land and how much they were being compensated for having to move elsewhere.

This problem had several components. Firstly, the Syracuse Department of Urban Renewal, charged with helping displaced families be recompensed and easing the transition, did not have jurisdiction over the majority of the highway path. By its charter, the Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency had jurisdiction solely over the 101-acre Near East Side Urban Renewal project, which while covering the segment between East Adams Street and Erie Boulevard would neglect the vast majority of the families in question. In total, while reported estimates conflict, some 790-900 families were displaced by this project – nearly a quarter of those who would eventually be displaced by urban renewal projects in Syracuse.

14 The next two numbers, cited by the articles below, are separated by four years’ time and show a discrepancy accounted for likely by the shift to the Almond Street path, which routed through a denser-populated area which was part of the Pioneer Homes project.

“Only 718 Units In Housing For Uprooted.” (The Post-Standard, 5 May 1957); Carroll, Walter. “Renewal Dept. Stymied By Lack of Funds, Staff.” (The Post-Standard, 13 Sep 1961)
Another concern was with how the Highway Acts were written. No provision was originally written into the legislation to compensate those in the projected path for their moving expenses. Even if the Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency had had the authority to assist those affected by the highway’s construction, it would be doing so solely from the budget of the City of Syracuse rather than those constructing the expressway. This oversight was corrected in 1962 with a bill persistently introduced by Senator Jacob K. Javits.

The State of New York faced fierce community opposition in one sense simply due to dissatisfaction with the amounts residents were being forced to sell their homes for. A neighborhood already in flux, with residents trying to move from the original routing along Townsend Street and the Near East Side Urban Renewal project areas, residents in the new path of the highway were concerned with the lack of input they had in the process and what they believed were poor values offered.

The residents in the area didn’t as much object to moving but to the lack of input they had on the decisions being made. A reporter in the same week as the announcement of the Almond Street shift of the

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15 The Senator previously introduced this measure at least once prior in 1961. It passed in the Senate, but failed in the House of Representatives.
Stateway plans interviewed several\(^\text{16}\) in the area who were resigned to moving. Concerns were raised in some cases about where they would go. Some, such as a garage owner in the area, were using the Stateway as their final excuse to move on and do something else.

Perhaps the most telling reaction “is found in the words of the last man questioned. ‘I’m not going to worry about it,’ … ‘It will be 10 years before they do anything.’”\(^\text{17}\) Little did he know how right he would be, although for the wrong reasons. It would be because of resistance resulting from state land evaluations that the progress is delayed, rather than the typical bureaucratic pace the interviewed man alluded to.

The basis for many area residents’ resistance is best summed up by one anonymous interviewee’s statement that “‘They [the state] never pay you the money you deserve for your property.’”\(^\text{18}\) The concern here proved correct. 1961 and 1962 saw many complaints, as assessments were completed of property to be acquired for the right-of-way. Re-checks of assessments were announced in 1962\(^\text{19}\) to resolve complaints received to that point, for 37 properties.

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\(^{17}\) Driver, “Stateway Fails to Stir”

\(^{18}\) Driver, “Stateway Fails to Stir”

\(^{19}\) Haggart, Robert. “State Begins Rechecking Route 81 Home Offers.” (The Post-Standard, 24 Feb 1962)
The South Side Home Owners Association (henceforth the “South Siders”) formed three weeks prior to the announcement of re-checks because they felt that the state had offered them low prices for their property. Members claimed that “[the state] will not negotiate with them over the price.” The South Siders were wholly comprised of homeowners south of Brighton Avenue, mostly in the Valley area of Syracuse. The organization joined forces with the East Side Cooperative Council, which covered the 15th Ward segment, the following month to press for aid and assistance for the homeowners who had to relocate.

The spot re-checks of assessments in response to complaints did not end project resistance, however. Conflict arose, primarily with the South Siders, who disagreed with the payment process: it paid 60 percent up front and the remainder in monthly payments. In May 1962, the group attempted to meet directly with Governor Nelson Rockefeller, whose staff rebuffed their request.

After complaining of the time it was taking to negotiate with the South Siders, the state spent would then spend the next two years stalling the project themselves. A May 1963 article says that while

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20 Stevens, William S. “Property Owners Balk.” (Syracuse Herald-Journal, 6 Feb 1962)
22 “Governor Won’t Meet With South Siders.” (Syracuse Herald-Journal, 10 May 1962)
23 Cosgrove, James M., “The ‘Forgotten Link.’” (Syracuse Herald-Journal, 12 May 1963)
homeowners in the area have been contacted with assessments and
instructions to prepare to move, and had heard nothing since. Deemed
the “forgotten link” by The Post-Standard, residents in the area began
to wonder if anything would ever be built at all. Per one public works
official, the process of gaining a right of way is a “long tortuous
process.” The first 84 of the homes in the path would not be
demolished until May 1964, and the full highway would not open
until 1969 with the opening of the Onondaga Interchange, with
Interstate 690.

Interstate 690, also known as the East-West Highway,
encountered far less opposition. In the 1930s, elevated embankments
had already been constructed through the city to raise railroad tracks
from their traffic problem-causing street level route. The railroad beds,
which would become the path for the new highway, provided a nearly
uninterrupted, save street underpasses, wall blocking Downtown from
the city’s North Side.

The plans for Interstate 690 were to acquire and then use the
elevated railroad beds, as this would be the most economical solution.
The editorial board of the Syracuse Herald-Journal took issue with this;
you wished instead that the State Department of Transportation

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24 Cosgrove, “Forgotten Link.”
25 Cosgrove, “Forgotten Link.”
26 Lee, Maurice D. “South Side Buildings Begin to Fall.” (The Post-Standard, 15 May 1964)
would replace the embankments with stilts like the Stateway was to be built upon. The editorial board concluded that “this east-west arterial should rest on stilts. … Remember, we’re building for the next 50, 75 years. These embankment plans for a city-dividing barrier can’t conform to the city’s or the citizen’s desires.”  

The board indicated that the only response they had received from the Department of Transportation was that removal of the embankments and replacing them with the stilts being constructed for the Stateway would increase the costs eight-fold.

The construction of Interstate 690 would require displacing another 232 rental units to expand the embankments which ran between Erie Boulevard East and Burnet Avenue heading east of Downtown. These units, in many cases similar to those displaced by other renewal projects, would add to the housing shortages caused by other projects.

Both the Stateway and the East-West Highway were the source of many concerns and displaced residents. What follows now is a discussion of the surrounding Near East Side and Downtown-1 plans, which were to address the surrounding area of the highways and revitalize the urban core.

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27 Editorial: “Open the north barrier!” (Syracuse Herald-Journal, 12 Dec 1965)
29 “Open the north barrier!”
The Near East Side and Downtown-1 Urban Renewal Plans

Urban renewal in the 15th Ward was comprised of two plans which would eventually displace over 2,200 families. 30 1,242 families faced displacement in the Near East Side Urban Renewal Plan, the first urban renewal program initiated in the city of Syracuse. This program covered the majority of the 15th Ward, excepting some of the southwestern portion which fell under the Downtown-1 program. At the time of the projection, a total of 3,337 families were to be displaced by the Near East Side program, the Upstate Medical University expansion and other programs, from 1957 to 1960 alone. “The figures for families that will be displaced by this ‘face-lifting’ project do not include the portion of the area that will be utilized for highway purposes.” 31 This gives an indication of the sheer magnitude of the programs and their effect on the 15th Ward. The first and foremost major program operating in the 15th Ward is the Near East Side program, which began in 1957.

It is because of this program that the Department of Urban Renewal, separate from the Department of City Planning, was formed. Later renamed the Department of Civic Improvement, and then folded back into the general City Planning department, this agency had near-total local control over the relocation of area residents and selection

30 “Only 718 Units”
31 “Only 718 Units”
and acquisition of properties. It also served as the liaison with the federal government for proposals, funding and approvals necessitated by the department of Housing and Urban Development.

The Downtown-1 project entered planning stages in 1964, and was officially proposed in 1965. Comprising the southwest corner of the 15th Ward and surrounding areas, and bounded by South State, East Jefferson, South Clinton and East Adams Streets, the Downtown-1 project was to rehabilitate many older structures and connect on the southern end the Central Business District to new civic structures in the Community Plaza. Designed mostly for commercial office space, with retail and food establishments on their first levels, the Downtown-1 project was much smaller in scope and one of the more successful projects.

One of the largest accomplishments of the project was the construction of MONY Center\(^{32}\), initially a one-tower 20-story commercial skyscraper that opened in 1967. Connected via tunnel to the Hotel Syracuse, then a thriving civic jewel, the Center’s tower landed the offices of Carrier Corporation and a new-to-Syracuse office of the Mutual of New York (MONY) for which it is named. Later, in the early 1970s, a second tower alongside it was constructed that is visibly planned for in the original plans for the first. The MONY

\(^{32}\) “MONY Center Building Contract Awarded.” (The Post-Standard, 16 Oct. 1964)
Center displaced mostly small businesses and the local Greyhound Bus depot. The bus depot itself was planning a new, modern station elsewhere within the Downtown-1 project, but eventually took over the former railroad station building on Erie Boulevard when the railroad tracks are diverted for the construction of Interstate 690.

The Downtown-1 proposal represents a departure from the previous Near East Side program, and a change in tone of the renewal programs under Mayor William F. Walsh. Unlike the Near East Side program, the program was much more focused, with developments in several cases planned before a single building was razed. Some of these fell through, like the Greyhound Bus station, but there were definite plans for the sort of structures that would be replacing those coming down.

The Syracuse department of Urban Renewal was led by George A. McCulloch, who would start as the office’s director and advance to the position of Commissioner of Urban Renewal until taking a position in Stamford, Connecticut in October 1964. One of the area’s staunchest supporters of urban renewal, the Syracuse Post-Standard newspaper at the time of his announced departure credited him with being the “driving force” behind urban renewal in Syracuse for nearly 20 years, since 1945.33

33 “George A. McCulloch Quits as City UR Chief” (The Post-Standard, 6 August 1964)
There is merit to The Post-Standard’s claim. Rising through various positions in city planning, and as one of the chief architects of the Near East Side Urban Renewal Project from its design nearly to its completion, McCulloch certainly had a lot of power, early in his tenure, in shaping the future of the 15th Ward and other areas of Syracuse.

It is acknowledged, however, in the same article that “it was no secret that McCulloch has been unhappy about renewal operations here … he is reported as having told associates that he was not directly involved in negotiations[^34^] and got his information from secondary sources.” What appears to be the case, inferred here, is a growing rivalry in leadership of urban renewal projects between a city official who had come up through several administrations and a rising star mayor whose ever-expanding renewal plans pre-empted McCulloch’s and depended on his subservience to Walsh’s plans, rather than leadership of renewal projects. While the article takes pains not to say that this was McCulloch’s reason for resigning, McCulloch was less than satisfied with his level of control of shaping the urban renewal progress in Syracuse later in his tenure.

[^34^]: The full quote indicates two projects, primarily, which this refers to: The MONY Center project and the relocation of the Greyhound Bus terminal, which had been located on the MONY Center’s future site.
Then-Mayor Walsh was another staunch and powerful supporter of urban renewal to revitalize the downtown core and stem the flow of people to suburban towns. It is likely that McCulloch and Walsh had faced off politically in an effort for Walsh\textsuperscript{35} to claim more credit for the MONY Center project and that the turf battle which ensued over the future of renewal projects in Syracuse led to his departure.

A former assistant director of New Haven, Connecticut’s urban renewal program\textsuperscript{36}, George B. Schuster, was selected in a national search to replace McCulloch as commissioner of the Department of Urban Improvement.\textsuperscript{37} Under Mayor Walsh and Commissioner Schuster, the scope and extent of urban renewal’s reach was expanded significantly. The projects, overall, became more grandiose and more focused than the razing efforts of the Near East Side project. While the Near East Side projects’ sites were cleared in many instances before a firm plan for the site was created, nearly the reverse was the case for other proposals that developed under their influence. In the case of the Clinton Square proposal, which will be discussed later, completed designs for the space (which never were fully realized) were in place before a single lot was acquired for demolition.

\textsuperscript{35} William F. Walsh was Mayor of Syracuse from 1962 to 1969, spanning the majority of the Urban Renewal period. He was preceded by Anthony A. Henninger, mentioned previously, who was Mayor from 1958 to 1961.

\textsuperscript{36} The New Haven Redevelopment Agency

\textsuperscript{37} “Schuster Replaces McCulloch in UI.” (The Post-Standard, 20 Sept. 1964)
With the change in leadership came an expansion of the office involved. Early criticisms of the office, in conjunction especially with its initial limited focus, came from the large programs outside of the office’s scope – action in the Stateway corridor, in the Upstate Medical University area, and other areas. As urban renewal programs expanded, it was clearly necessary to expand the staff to assist with planning and executing programs. With the creation of larger plans under Schuster and Walsh, higher level of staffing was required, which led to incorporation of the department into the City Planning unit in 1966.

The consolidation of the City Planning units would not end the changes in urban renewal program leadership. 1968 would see a change in party control in the Common Council, the city legislative body. It would also see a change in the way urban renewal programs were managed. A city-county urban renewal agency was formed, recognizing the importance of renewal to not only the city but the county for which it was the seat.

The Community Plaza Proposal

Mayor Henninger in 1958 proposed a grand vision: a central civic and cultural hub that would transform a run-down neighborhood into a gleaming community showcase. Located just east of the Central
Business District and bounded by McCarthy Avenue, South State, Townsend, and Harrison Streets, the new cultural center of the city was included as part of the Near East Side Urban Renewal Program. It is of such separate significance that it deserves a more detailed examination.

The Community Plaza was designed to include a New City Hall, a new Public Safety Building, a common pedestrian plaza with a reflecting pool, and an art museum, among other things. At the time of its original proposal, it would straddle the then-sunken Stateway corridor just west of Townsend Street. This element would be removed six months later when the Stateway was moved to the elevated Almond Street path.

The plaza would also include improvements to the existing county steam station (the only building in the Community Plaza footprint that wasn’t demolished) and a new commercial building or parking facility on the north end. The Public Safety building was constructed in 1964. The northern end of the property was developed, although those structures were replaced in 2003 by a new joint city-county criminal courthouse building.

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38 McCarthy Avenue, a one-block alleyway, is just south of East Genesee Street
39 The steam station was originally constructed in conjunction with the eight story county office building, constructed in the 1950s, which sits across State Street from the Community Plaza site.
40 Details remain vague as to what was constructed in that end, although the land was zoned for small commercial buildings. They were demolished for the construction of the criminal courthouse building in 2003.
The City Hall proposal is an interesting study: designed to be the city’s third City Hall, a new building would ease cramping in the existing (and presently used) stone structure on East Washington Street for a growing government. Several city offices at the time (as well as the Common Council legislative body), used office spaces in other nearby buildings due to a lack of room in the City Hall building. The building was designed and present in many renderings of the Community Plaza proposal and in the 1965\textsuperscript{41} was stated to be “in an advanced design stage.”

It is not mentioned again in either the 1966 or 1968 Workable Program annual reports, but the building remained on planning grids as late as 1969, when the pedestrian plaza and Everson Museum of Art opened. Under a later plan for a civic center and county office building across the street, the City Hall building disappeared from plans and is replaced with a county library to replace the main Carnegie-built library on Montgomery and Jefferson Streets.

As it turns out, neither proposal was built at any point on the City Hall site. The site remained completely vacant until a new Justice Center building, complementing the Public Safety building, was constructed in the early 1990s. The newer focus on the Model Cities

program (which will be discussed later) and other downtown projects likely contributed to the project sitting on the back burner before finally being wholly discarded.

The consolidation of urban renewal and planning agencies of the late 1960s, coupled with the change in party of city leadership from 1968 to 1970 (first of the Common Council, then of the Mayor’s Office) led to a change in priorities which will be discussed further later.

City Democrats had since the beginning of the Near East Side program criticized the renewal programs’ handling by the Republican mayors under which most of them occurred. Once they gained power, the focus would change somewhat as well. The Community Plaza proposal, still under way, was one of those priorities which changed.

No more than half of the major components of the Community Plaza, then, were successfully carried to completion. What is interesting, however, is how the Syracuse community received those parts that were completed.

The South Plaza, like most components of the originating Near East Side program, was a mixed success. An underground garage was constructed below the plaza, which later proved to be an issue. The reflecting pool, originally designed for ice-skating in the wintertime, turned out to be feasible for neither purpose. Drainage system issues plagued the pool; the pool did not hold water, and when filled, water
seeped onto the cars parked below in the underground garage. The commissioner of Parks and Recreation determined that the pool was not suitable to be adapted for its original wintertime purpose, ice-skating, either. What this effectively means, then, is that a large sum of money was poured into a beautiful reflecting pool for it to sit as a concrete trash basin to the public.

Adjacent to the plaza is one of the enduring successes of the Community Plaza proposal, the Everson Museum of Art. Designed by famous architect I.M. Pei⁴², the structure sits on the southwest corner of the Plaza, a well-known and established art museum that draws many to the Plaza area. The new home of the museum was completed and opened in 1968, moving from an older site.⁴³ The museum celebrated its 100-year anniversary with a gala in the South Plaza in 1997. Dick Case, columnist for the Syracuse Post-Standard, reflected upon the event, stating that it was the first time that the South Plaza had actually realized the potential its 1960s designers envisioned. He quotes⁴⁴ from the original proposal, the 1960 design statement for the Community Plaza:

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⁴² I.M. Pei, an internationally famous and well-recognized architect, also designed the Newhouse Communications complex for Syracuse University.
⁴³ The former site of the Everson Museum of Art was at the corner of James and North State Streets. It has since been demolished and replaced with a gas station.
⁴⁴ Case, Dick. “A downtown dream flickered to life on Community Plaza” (Syracuse Herald-Journal, 6 June 1997)
This plaza should be in direct contrast to the formal, government plaza, with an atmosphere of playful activity.

This may be accomplished by landscaping, sculpture, mosaics, murals, etc. It is proposed that more sitting spaces be provided in a small depressed area, for enjoyment of outdoor concerts.

This informal cultural plaza will attract people during the daytime or nighttime, and during intermissions of events in the various buildings, people will congregate in this plaza.

The design statement is an ambitious one. As Case points out, however, there is a disconnect between the design statement and the product which resulted. The reflecting pool (which was finally repaired in the mid-1970s to allow its use), he argues, draws people in the summer when it is operating. The remainder of the year, “the place is as bare as the tundra.”

Because the plaza features little that would attract citizens in wintertime – no skating rink, or winter exhibits, or anything besides shaped concrete – the plaza sits vacant save as an occasional resting place during Syracuse’s long winter months, far from the potential its designers intended and somewhat symbolic of the void the project left in terms of community, and unlike the year-round community activity center it was designed to be.

The Community Plaza was but a small portion of the Near East Side program that affected the 15th Ward. But it is symbolic in many

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45 Case, “Community Plaza”
ways of the damage that the program wreaked upon the 15th Ward and the dramatic upheaval that urban renewal programs caused in Syracuse. What follows is a written depiction of what rose from the rubble of the 15th Ward.

**East of the 15th Ward: Thornden East**

Early urban renewal efforts went beyond the 15th Ward. Plans were generated for nearly every city neighborhood, including some four or five plans at any given time for parts of Downtown Syracuse. The area just east of the 15th Ward is hardly an exception to this; the Thornden East plan, developed in 1964, covered effectively the area due east of the 15th Ward and south of the East-West Highway, with the exception of the then-still-developing Meadowbrook area. This area, referred to as the East Side was, as it is now, split between general residential and off-campus student housing.

The Thornden East plan was split along those lines. The majority of the structures classified as dilapidated or deteriorated were in the lower-income residential areas north of the Westcott Street business district and between East Fayette and East Genesee Streets. Some of these structures were within the actual business district; many

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46 The Thornden East plan spawned from a project jointly created with students from the Syracuse University School of Architecture that is also referred to as the University East project. They are interchangeable.

47 See Appendix D: Map displaying 1964 structure classifications for Thornden East plan, from the University East Physical Development Plan.
of those have since been converted to storefronts or demolished to make way for them.

In the Syracuse University off-campus housing portion of the project (primarily those areas within two blocks of Euclid Avenue and southwest of the Westcott Street business district, as it remains today), the primary concern of the study was the elimination of deteriorated apartments and homes and solving the parking challenges of the older neighborhood.

The primary fault that students from a Syracuse University architecture team studying with this neighborhood’s student housing areas of this project is a lack of parking and poorly conceived infrastructure. This conclusion was reached from the narrow older roads spanning the neighborhood, many of which predated cars, and the division of many homes into multiple apartments and a perceived need for additional parking from the increased density of the neighborhood. Narrow brick-paved hills, showing the age of the roads, remain in the project area to this day. Many homes in the area were without or with inadequate driveways, and the streets were narrow to the point that street parking was difficult.

The topography of the entire planning project area itself challenges proposals for the area. Non-right angle intersections such as that of South Beech and Westcott Streets were problematic traffic
concerns (South Beech Street is a primary conduit between Thornden Park and the Westcott Street business district, and Westcott Street is the high-traffic primary arterial road through the planning project area; the two streets intersect in an acute triangle, with limited visibility). Other roads through the project area, such as Clarendon Street and Ackerman Avenue, are narrow and steep due to the hilly topography.

North of the Westcott Street business district is another story. While the same parking and transportation issues plagued this area as well (its topography was similarly difficult), this area was plagued with substandard housing which from 1950 to 1960 had increased from 5.4% to 7.6%; the percentage of this portion, however, was nearly 50%. The area was also home to two schools which were being considered for retirement. Levy Junior High, at Fellows Avenue and Harvard Place, started as high school and was deemed inadequate due to the inability to expand its facilities and its small physical plant. Sumner Elementary, at Bassett and South Beech Streets just east of Thornden Park was decommissioned several years later for similar reasons. These schools’ potential closure and the designated substandard housing in the area made it a ripe target for redevelopment.

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48 University East, Syracuse, New York Physical Development Plan, pp. 9-10
The most radical proposal came from architecture students at Syracuse University, who proposed realigning the area with a new arterial and displacing more than 250 housing units in the process. The proposal would have created wider streets, a new modern shopping district near the Westcott Street district (which would be turned into a residential street by the new arterial connecting Comstock Avenue and Columbus Street) and turning an the site of an envisioned decommissioned Levy site into new apartment housing. The plan indicated as its primary concern the modernization of the transportation infrastructure and the creation of new housing units, which due to projected university expansion would be in high demand.

The proposed plan put forth by the Walsh administration was much more conservative; the administration was far more concerned with the removal of blight and reconstruction of new housing units in their place than in radically altering the neighborhood.

In the concentrated blight areas, one particularly poor block was considered for higher density housing. This block would eventually be home to the Cherry Hill apartment complex, although other project delays would push the start of its construction back for nearly five years.
Corruption scandals over the awarding of demolition contracts and the overall operations of the urban renewal agency arose in the late 1960s, stopping any progress on the Thornden East project. By the end of the Walsh administration, many substandard homes had been demolished in the concentrated blight areas; the fate of these areas would however be left to planners during the Alexander administration. Many of the ideas for these areas of the project would eventually be rolled into the larger Syracuse Hill plan in the early 1970s.

While this plan is entirely outside of the 15th Ward, it is the area immediately east of it. It is not surprising to find from the table of structural conditions that the highest concentration of substandard-rated housing is in the areas directly adjacent to the 15th Ward boundary; political boundaries rarely exactly contain the problems which had made the neighborhoods targets in the first place. In the same way, the boundaries of the Near East Side Urban Renewal program hardly contained the city’s desire to redevelop its neighborhoods and reduce blight, and this continued into this area.

By the end of the 1960s, redevelopment projects in and around the 15th Ward had stagnated, and the voters of Syracuse elected a new leader, Lee Alexander. The redevelopment of the 15th Ward and other
areas of the city would fall nearly exclusively under the new mayor, Lee Alexander, and his administration’s control.

**Reflecting Changing Priorities: The Alexander Years**

The end of the 1960s brought the election of perhaps one of the most notorious mayors in Syracuse history: Lee Alexander. A Democrat, Alexander served as mayor of Syracuse from 1970 to 1985 and over a dramatic change in priorities with regard to urban renewal and urban planning.

Alexander’s campaign and inauguration were both described as non-traditional and upbeat. His inauguration ceremony was held for the first time not in City Hall but in the newly finished Everson Museum of Art in the Community Plaza. He envisioned “a greater city whose people will face the future with confidence…” and stressed a new direction for Syracuse in his inaugural address.

The end of the Walsh years had left little closure on the urban renewal programs in Syracuse. The Alexander administration remained devoted to finishing those projects started under Walsh along with some new initiatives to stem Syracuse’s population decline.

*With the passage in 1974 of the Housing and Community Development Act, focus returned to urban renewal programs and new*

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50 Bliven, “Alexander Sworn in as Mayor”
initiatives. It was clear from the 1970 census\textsuperscript{51} that the programs of the past had not yet stemmed the population losses in Syracuse, and that change was necessary; the city population dropped by nearly 19,000 people while gaining almost 1,500 housing units.

The Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 brought in Community Development Grant programs that cities could use as incentives for home improvements in impoverished neighborhoods. These incentives were planned into the redevelopment of the rest of the 15\textsuperscript{th} Ward and nearby areas, including the housing complexes mentioned previously.

The Walsh years had left a legacy of displacement for Alexander to solve. With the construction of the Cherry Hill and Kennedy Square complexes in the early 1970s, and other projects elsewhere in the city, the number of housing units per the census increased from 71,844 units at the start of his term to 73,175 by 1980.

During Alexander’s term there were also major school renovation projects. The first city high school, Central High School, was replaced with a new building on the city’s Southwest side. Major renovations, including the installation of air conditioning in many school buildings, were accomplished during his term.

\textsuperscript{51} The 1960 census reports the population of Syracuse as 216,038; the 1970 census reported a city population of 197,297. Source: 1990 Census report, Table 46, pp. 608.
The federal Model Cities program, which had been applied for in the late 1960s under Walsh, was executed under the Alexander administration. This program briefly revitalized the city’s Southwest and Valley neighborhoods but would fizzle out before solving the underlying problems in those neighborhoods. The Model Cities program will be but mentioned here; the list of its failings could fill a paper of its own of similar length.

The Alexander years saw changes in the city’s core, as well. A new performing arts and office space complex was designed and constructed as the Civic Center (a part of the OnCenter complex today), adjacent to Columbus Circle in the Downtown-1 project area.

By and large, the majority of urban renewal programs outside of the Model Cities program under Alexander dealt with the redevelopment of areas razed in previous programs. After the Stateway was constructed, areas to its east had stagnated somewhat. What follows details two other major proposals in and around the 15th Ward: the University East plan from the Walsh administration and the Syracuse Hill program from the Alexander administration.

At the eastern edge of the Near East Side project area, a new state psychiatric facility would rise in the razed areas adjacent to the former Washington Irving School on Harrison Street. This and other
developments would come in under the Syracuse Hill program, which will be covered later.

The Syracuse Hill project should have formed the cornerstone of the Alexander administration. It contained clear, definite plans, provided nearly sufficient additional housing to replace that which had been demolished in the 15th Ward under the previous administrations, and picked up the end of another project (Thornden East) of the previous administration. But before the results are criticized, perhaps the project should be explained.

The Syracuse Hill project spans both Thornden East’s areas north of the Westcott Street business district and the remainder of the 15th Ward projects east of the Stateway. The Syracuse Hill Neighborhood Development Plan, which started in 1971\textsuperscript{52}, would renew the University Hill planning area. This, coupled with an expanded code enforcement project for the remainder of the Thornden East area, would attempt to fix the problems left unsolved by the stunted Thornden East project.

**Syracuse Hill: A Plan for Rebuilding the 15th Ward**

The intricate patchwork of urban renewal plans and existing projects in that eastern 15th Ward challenged development in the 15th Ward’s eastern areas (as well as other areas east of the Stateway).

\textsuperscript{52} A Workable Program for Community Improvement for the city of Syracuse, New York (1971 report), Planning and Programming section, pp. 18.
Several proposals over the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as the initial construction and subsequent expansion of the Upstate Medical Center complex, culminated in the Syracuse Hill project, which eventually spanned from the East-West Highway south to Syracuse University and from the Stateway east to Thornden Park and Columbus Street along East Genesee Street. This plan, coupled with the earlier University East plan (the eastern blocks of the Syracuse Hill plan east through to Cumberland Avenue and south to Broad Street) formed the majority of urban renewal programs in the southeast quadrant of Syracuse.

The Syracuse Hill proposal itself was the product of several other smaller proposals, shelved in the late 1960s and revived under Mayor Lee Alexander in the early 1970s. While the final details of the proposal were not finalized until the late fall of 1973, the plan entered execution as early as 1971. More concrete than the earlier University East and Near East Side projects, this project at the outset had plans firmly in place for what would be placed in specific sites, whereas the first was mostly confined to general planning and the latter was devoted to a near-complete leveling of the entire area with little prejudice. In many ways, the Near East Side project and other razing in the eastern 15th Ward had left the Alexander administration with a

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53 University East proposal is dated June 1964; final Syracuse Hill report was completed in November 1973.
nearly blank slate for redevelopment. Large portions of the 15th Ward had been cleared during the Walsh years and then left undeveloped as renewal progress slowed.

The planned erection of two moderate income housing complexes within the project would replace some of the housing units displaced by previous projects. Kennedy Square, on the northern edge of the 15th Ward along East Fayette Street, would contain 409 housing units and replace primarily light commercial and industrial sites cleared in the Near East Side program.

Cherry Hill apartments, located along East Genesee Street just east of the 15th Ward boundary, would install 164 more housing units in place of substandard housing identified and partially cleared under the Thornden East project. The two apartment complexes, discussed earlier, would with other projects throughout the city attempt to ease the housing shortage created by other renewal programs. Both complexes opened in 1974, adding 57354 new low- to moderate-income housing units to the area.

An additional 300 units of housing were proposed for a 6.3 acre parcel bounded by Irving Avenue, Harrison and Madison Streets, and University Avenue. In the 1974 program proposal, an unnamed

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54 Economic and Market Analysis Study: Syracuse Hill, Syracuse, New York pp. 4-5
developer has been selected and plans were being prepared, including closure of two blocks of Madison Street to serve the community.

The next component of the Syracuse Hill project involved commercial districts. Three existing commercial districts were within the boundaries of the project: the Marshall Street, East Genesee Street-Irving Avenue, and East Genesee Street-Columbus Park business districts.

The East Genesee Street-Columbus Park district, a small commercial district serving the immediate vicinity with cleaners, and markets, would remain largely untouched by the Syracuse Hill project save the increase in business spurred by the construction of Cherry Hill apartments across the street. Constrained on all sides by residential or recreational land, the business district had little room to expand save into the light industrial areas closer to Erie Boulevard.

The plans surrounding the East Genesee-Irving Avenue district are less clear. This business district, built up along East Genesee Street near the Regent Theatre complex (renamed in 1974 with the founding of Syracuse Stage), contained small specialty shops serving professionals working in the area, as well as the residents of nearby neighborhoods. The housing being developed a block south of the

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55 The two East Genesee Street business districts are combined for the purposes of the 1974 Economic and Market Analysis Study: Syracuse Hill, Syracuse, New York, but they as they are separated by a half mile of residential neighborhoods, they are considered separately here.
district would impact demand in the district. Block 240, bounded by South Crouse and Irving Avenues and East Genesee and East Fayette Streets, the block is generically dedicated for further retail functions with no specific plans as of the plan’s publication.

It is the Marshall Street district which will be most affected under this plan. A retail and restaurant district which served much of the Syracuse University and adjacent medical complex community, this business district was slated for expansion both in retail capacity and in vehicle parking capacity. A new parking garage was to be constructed across Irving Avenue from the Upstate Medical Center and Crouse Irving Hospital, providing 680 parking spaces for staff and patients of the medical centers. Other off-street parking would be created in places too small to construct larger structures. The retail community in the Marshall Street business district would gain some room to grow under the Syracuse Hill proposal as well. Plans in 1974 called for new retail space in what is presently Marshall Square Mall; little was specified as far as what would be built at that time.

The majority of the sites planned for redevelopment above were previously cleared by the Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency, where homes deemed substandard had been condemned and demolished.

At the Syracuse Hill project’s western boundaries is the Hutchings Psychiatric Center, located along the Almond Street and the
Stateway. An initial portion was constructed alongside the Upstate Medical Center facilities earlier; according to plan documents the facility was to expand by 13 buildings covering four blocks, extending east to Irving Avenue, north in parts to East Genesee Street, south to Harrison Street and west to Almond Street and the Stateway.

The redevelopment projects constitute approximately a third of the land area controlled by the Syracuse Hill project. Another third is occupied by existing medical facilities. The remaining third mostly comprises existing homes and neighborhoods deemed in sufficiently good condition or else slated for demolition and replacement individually.

As we’ve seen with other urban renewal projects, all fall short of their initial expectations. The Syracuse Hill project is no exception. Cherry Hill and Kennedy Square both opened in early 1975, only slightly behind schedule. The two complexes quickly showed their poor construction; Cherry Hill was condemned thirty years later and is now slated for demolition later this year. Kennedy Square remains open but in disrepair, a function of poor construction, poorer maintenance and a general lack of attention since the end of the Alexander administration.

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56 Economic and Market Analysis Study: Syracuse Hill, Syracuse, New York, pp. 10-12
The 300 units of housing, near as can be determined, were never built, or if they were they were quickly displaced. A medical office building and parking garage, a few parking lots, and a research facility of Upstate Medical University currently occupy the space slated in the 1974 plans. Madison Street remains passable through the planned space to this day.

Marshall Square Mall was constructed on the site slated for retail expansion; the one-acre two-story mall currently houses a few general service providers, a post office and fast-food restaurants as a supplement to the Marshall Street business district. It never truly caught on as a major retail center, but did alleviate the retail space constraints which had stalled expansion of the district. The mall is now owned by Syracuse University and is now a semi-academic building, with classrooms on its upper level since the mid-1990s. Parking garages now dot the eastern approach to the university; in addition to the planned garage, recently reconstructed, two additional garages have been constructed along East Adams Street to handle the parking needs of the medical university and its patients at University Hospital.

The psychiatric complex did complete its expansion. Upstate Medical University has expanded to include new buildings alongside it down Irving Avenue, preventing any further expansion.
The block in the East Genesee Street-Irving Avenue business district has seen little change since the proposal. It remains a fairly run-down block of half-vacant retail storefronts, in part affected by the decline of the Kennedy Square complex nearby. Increased office space usage and classroom expansion by medical institutions and Syracuse University’s drama programs have nearly wholly supplanted the business district’s storefronts.

The Syracuse Hill project began with the best of intentions, not unlike many of the other projects that have been discussed here. With the exception of the much smaller Community Plaza project, it is likely the most successful of the projects presented here; most of the components which were planned were built, with a few exceptions. The hallmark of the Syracuse Hill project would be not what it accomplished but what it failed to accomplish. One of the primary objectives of urban renewal programs, besides obviously renewing and redeveloping urban areas, was to stem the flow of citizens to the suburbs and to other cities. While the metropolitan population increased by 6,375 from 1970 to 1980, the city population during the same period declined by 27,192 – the steepest population decline on

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record for Syracuse. The population declines which had spawned the urban renewal programs in the late 1950s were far smaller.

While the 15th Ward was far from the only area of Syracuse affected by urban renewal, it was certainly the most affected. Of structures which were present in the ward in 1960, perhaps a dozen remain. With the Syracuse Hill plan and other projects as will be discussed now, the landscape of the 15th Ward would be changed forever.

**Dealing with the Housing Shortage**

Beyond those homes razed in the construction of the Stateway, the remaining portions of the 15th Ward were not to remain standing for very long. Partially as a result of the displacement of lower-income families and the partial demolition of the Pioneer Homes development, an area just south of Erie Boulevard near South Crouse Avenue was demolished for the construction of the Kennedy Square housing complex in the early 1975. The Kennedy Square complex was built in effect to solve some of the housing shortages that were indicated earlier. Designed to include townhouse-style as well as apartment-style housing, the buildings housed a total of 409 families.

Just southeast of the Kennedy Square complex and of the 15th Ward, a similar complex called Cherry Hill apartments was

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58 The city population declined from 197,297 to 170,105. Source: 1990 Census Report, Table 48, pp. 646.
constructed under the Syracuse Hill project. Also built in 1975, the complex was comprised of 164 apartments. The complex closed in 2004, and is slated for demolition as the building has fallen into disrepair.

These two were elements of the plan to create more housing options to those whose homes were demolished in the urban renewal programs in the area. Other projects were constructed, including several high-rise apartment complexes along Gifford and West Streets on the near west side. These high-rise projects, which include complexes in all four quadrants of Syracuse, resolved the shortage of lower-income housing units and spread them throughout the community.

The Townsend Towers and Madison Towers complexes, adjacent to the Community Plaza, were built with the caveat that they would reserve housing space for elderly tenants. The former Madison School, on Madison Street near Syracuse University, was converted into condominiums.

But by and large, period editorials indicate\(^5^9\) the housing which rose in and immediately around the 15\(^{th}\) Ward did not have sufficient apartments, subsidized or otherwise targeting lower-income households, for those who lost their homes. Many displaced residents

\(^5^9\) Editorial: “Urban Renewal” (The Daily Orange, 12 Nov 1971)
were forced into the high-rise complexes, which moved them, as well as the crime problems for which the 15th Ward had become notorious, into these spread out high-rise complexes around the city. Not unlike other cities nationwide, these projects created new, modern apartments which immediately encountered even larger problems than the previous communities had by concentrating the previous problems. Lower-density complexes, which didn’t become as major crime issues, fell into disrepair. Cherry Hill has been condemned and is demolition-bound. Kennedy Square remains open for the time being, but its future is in question.

**The 15th Ward Razing and Redevelopment**

Other areas were demolished, such as along the Townsend Street corridor, for the Community Plaza earlier discussed. In fact, plans indicated that nearly 90 percent of the 15th Ward was to be demolished or rehabilitated over the course of the Near East Side and Downtown-1 urban renewal programs.

Large portions of the 15th Ward would remain vacant and serve as parking lots (including the parking lots still existing along Harrison Street, soon to be the site of a new hotel). The opposite side, between

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60 A copy of the diagram from the report is included as an appendix to this thesis for reference purposes.
61 See appendix for annotated project diagram.
62 Proposed since the construction of the Convention Center, a new Convention Center Hotel tower (projected at 6-10 stories tall) is to begin construction in late 2007.
South State and Montgomery Streets, would not be developed until they became the site of the Onondaga County Convention Center in the mid-1980s.63

The Hutchings Psychiatric Center, a later addition to the SUNY Upstate Medical Center complex, rose around the former Washington Irving School from the site of razed homes along Madison and Almond Streets. Its first buildings were constructed in the 1960s; over the 1970s under the Syracuse Hill program it underwent a major expansion which opened in the late 1970s. A state medical facility, the psychiatric facility surrounded the decommissioned Washington Irving School on Harrison Street, the last remnants of the community there. The school had closed shortly after the community around it fell and has since then been used Syracuse City School District as its district offices.

The SUNY Upstate complex, including the University Hospital complex, would encompass the area west of Irving Avenue and south of Harrison Street all the way to what pieces remain of the Pioneer Homes complex to the east of Almond Street and I-81. Parking garages now cover what once was a neighborhood.

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63 The OnCenter complex began construction in the late 1980s and was completed in 1992.
In the northeast corner of the Ward, one area remained vacant for twenty years until a business incubator was constructed on a site at the corner of East Fayette Street and University Avenue. The surrounding areas were developed nearly as haphazardly and lethargically; a more recent renewal project, the razing of the old Midtown Plaza along Water Street and Erie Boulevard in the mid-1990s gave way to current construction work on the Syracuse Center of Excellence project. Several lots in that area, razed in the 1960s, remain vacant even today.

Assessing the Damage: Reflections, Then and Now

Urban renewal programs, in particular the haphazardly executed Near East Side program and subsequent Syracuse Hill proposal, came under heavy fire at the time of their proposal. While progress everywhere was agreed to be a positive step, many believed that a middle ground could be reached. Not everyone had given up hope on the 15th Ward enough to want to see it leveled completely.

In 1961, laying out his vision for urban renewal in Syracuse, George A. McCulloch wrote that “the program will fail in its objectives if we displace families without ultimately providing better homes in

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64 The Midtown Plaza building, once home to Smith-Corona and other industries over its long life, was one of less than a dozen buildings spared the wrecking ball in the Near East Side program. It was demolished in 1999.
better neighborhoods.\footnote{McCulloch, George A. “Urban Renewal ‘Must’ For Syracuse in Sixties.” (The Post-Standard, 8 Jan 1961)} If the Near East Side program (or most other Syracuse renewal programs, for that matter) were to be judged by that statement, then ultimately urban renewal in Syracuse was a failure. It failed to eradicate slums and run-down neighborhoods; it simply moved them around, which in turn expedited rather than stemmed the flow of those who could afford a move to suburban communities. The population of the Syracuse Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) remained for the most part stable (in fact slowly growing) since the time of these programs, while the population of the city of Syracuse had dropped by over 45,000 people between 1960 and 1980.\footnote{Population in 1960: 216,038; Population in 1980: 170,105, a decline of 45,933. Source: 1990 Census report, Table 46, pp. 608.}

An editorial\footnote{“Urban Renewal”} published in the Daily Orange student newspaper in 1971 openly criticized the city of Syracuse for failing miserably in these relocation programs. To level an entire community, most members of which are lower-income residents, requires a plan to put them somewhere. Yet housing developments and high rise apartments, which rose to replace the neighborhoods, targeted primarily middle-class tenants rather than replacing the lower-income housing whose shortage should have been an obvious result of displacing nearly 3,000 low- to moderate-income families over a short period of time.
Conclusions

Urban renewal programs in Syracuse have left a lasting imprint upon the city and metropolitan area as a whole. Designed to stem the suburban exodus, the trickle of the 1950s (a loss of only 5,000 people and change) became a full-fledged river as the city population had declined by nearly 60,000 people by the year 2000.

There are successes that survive from this era for which the city planners should be congratulated. Landing a world-famous architect for the construction of not one but two buildings in Syracuse put the city on the map internationally for architecture. It is only too unfortunate that the path of progress shortsightedly caused many other buildings, including the former home of the Everson Museum of Art, to fall victim to the wrecking ball rather than restoration as excellent examples of older and interesting architecture.

The 15th Ward faced many difficult challenges in dealing with its problems. But, as the Post-Standard editorial board wrote in 2003 reflecting on it, "It was the mid-60s and African-Americans were still fighting for the right to sit at a lunch counter — let alone the right to sit at the table during economic development discussions that would profoundly affect them."

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68 The original turn-of-the-century brick building for the Everson Museum of Art, at the corner of State and James Streets, gave way for a gas station.

Lee Alexander brought in 1970 a new vision of how Syracuse could be a great city again. And in a way, it worked: his plans brought closure to many of the previous urban renewal failures, including finally finishing the reflecting pool in the Community Plaza properly. Where his predecessors had failed to carry renewal plans to completion, his projects were the most complete and best planned.

Towards the end of his term, it was determined just why that had moved as smoothly as it had. Alexander was imprisoned in 1988, for extorting “$1.43 million in kickbacks from businesses while he was Mayor in Syracuse,”\textsuperscript{70} for a six year term.

Despite these development successes and the later corruption charges, Alexander also presided over the worst population decline in Syracuse history. Even without the corruption charges, we cannot declare the renewal efforts under his administration to be a success either. The Central Business District declined under his administration as well, as it did across the nation. The flow of people and of businesses into the suburbs, while hardly under the Alexander administration’s control, do not speak well of the success of his urban renewal plans.

His inaugural address was quoted earlier, speaking of promise and vision for Syracuse and whose people would look to the future.

\textsuperscript{70} “Ex-Syracuse Mayor Completes His Sentence.” \textit{The New York Times} 12 Feb 1994
with confidence. The census tells us that the citizens of Syracuse weren’t confident about the city’s future, and while the metropolitan area grew, the city lost over 25,000 people by 1980 – or over 50,000 from 1950 to 1980.

It is safe to say that urban renewal in Syracuse was ultimately a failure. While pockets of blighted areas indeed disappeared under new buildings and civic structures, others still remain vacant today. Looking around today at the sites that were to be renewed then, you’ll see structures were less architecturally interesting and several poorly constructed ones. Witness the fate of the housing projects developed during this time, as with housing projects nationwide constructed at low cost and carrying with them many of the same problems as were the original reason for razing much of the 15th Ward in the first place. Fowler High School, which replaced the Central High School under Alexander, is in the first tier of schools marked in the present ten-year reconstruction plan due to poor construction – ahead of the other three built in the fifteen years prior.

Describing the Community Plaza’s lifelessness earlier, Dick Case wrote that it was “bare as the tundra.” Arguably, outside of normal business hours, so is the majority of Downtown Syracuse, and it is in no small part the fault of urban renewal programs and the lively neighborhood destroyed as their result.
Case’s statement could easily be applied to the architecture of the period as well – little architecturally interesting, save the Everson Museum itself, was constructed as a result of these programs; in the name of progress, interesting older buildings came down in favor of bland architecture that took the character of downtown Syracuse with it. Some of the remaining architecture is being reclaimed now, with the return of residential components of downtown in converted warehouses.

**Imagining Syracuse without the Divide**

Lamented throughout its construction and by many ever since for the utilitarian eyesore it has become, the Stateway bridges running through downtown Syracuse have been in recent years the subject of an ongoing debate. According to State Department of Transportation officials, the bridge spans have an estimated lifespan of 50 years, and will require substantial overhauling if not complete reconstruction.

Syracuse Common Councilor Van Robinson in 2006 held the first of what he anticipated as several community discussions on the future of the elevated bridges. “‘It’s time to very seriously consider taking that highway down and the benefits that could accrue,’ Robinson said” at the time. State Transportation Department spokesman Anthony Ilacqua had indicated to him and to other officials

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72 Kirst, Sean. “Tear Down This Wall” *The Post-Standard* 20 Mar 2006
that decisions would need to be made “in the next five to 10 years”\textsuperscript{73} regarding its future. He indicated that recent studies estimate 90,000 cars traverse the affected stretch daily.

Van Robinson envisions a tree-lined boulevard, creating an inviting access that is pedestrian-friendly and encourages connecting the Syracuse University hill with downtown. Echoing sentiments from the time of its construction, he believes that the Stateway’s elevated spans are an “eyesore,”\textsuperscript{74} creating a barrier rather than an access to the center of Syracuse.

Sean Kirst, whose columns on the character of Syracuse and its people covered these developments, himself alongside many area residents believe as 1950s Chamber of Commerce president Carl Marr did that the Stateway’s bridges form an elevated “Chinese Wall”-esque barrier. In a profile of Mark Robbins, dean of the Syracuse University School of Architecture, Kirst and Robbins reflect on the 1950s and 1960s planning ideas: that “the only way of keeping Upstate cities viable was by shoving motorists in and out, at any cost.”\textsuperscript{75}

The Empire Stateway was envisioned as the savior of downtown Syracuse, a conduit to bring people and businesses into the city. Instead, as the long lines at off-ramps just before the opening of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{73} Eisenstadt, Marnie. “State Urged to Remove Syracuse’s I-81” \textit{The Post-Standard} 22 Mar 2006
\item \textsuperscript{74} Kirst. “Tear Down This Wall”
\item \textsuperscript{75} Kirst, Sean. “Wall Stands In Way of Downtown Renaissance” \textit{The Post-Standard} 30 Mar 2005
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
business hours and similarly long lines at on-ramps at their close show it has instead become a primary conduit for the suburban exodus that it was designed to avoid.

While the Stateway was but one component of the urban renewal programs in Syracuse, it is perhaps the perfect embodiment of the programs’ failures. Instead of a vital link, bringing visitors and residents alike back into a revitalized city core, it serves as an express corridor away from an area whose government-encouraged revitalization is only now beginning to be realized through recent public and private ventures, performed not by tearing to shreds but repairing the torn pieces of Syracuse’s urban core.

Recent ventures under a new community-oriented Syracuse University chancellor who envisions integrating with rather than segregating the university from the city have spawned a “Connective Corridor” project underway to highlight bright pockets and connect the university to new downtown campus buildings – and downtown to the campus – with bus and walking routes taking a lazy L around the busiest underpasses of the Stateway.

Imagine, as some already have, Syracuse without that wall to connect around and instead a vibrant community of walkable businesses and parks that invited community gathering and connections. Imagine further still creating from the rubble of these
overpasses an actual downtown renaissance, right in the center of the city, finally realizing the promise of the Community Plaza and other facilities and reuniting a downtown currently cordoned off by a railway and two major highways with the rest of the city.

There are those who believe that exactly this could happen. As Kirst wrote, describing Robbins and the separation the highway created as a “separation of the campus from the core of Syracuse…that became as spiritual as it is physical.” Robbins wrote of the School of Architecture’s efforts in this area were intending was “to open corridors between things that work, not just physically, but academically and intellectually as well.” With a little imagination, some strong leadership, and a little hard work, we can achieve exactly what urban renewal efforts intended, and realize the potential of its few successes by undoing the efforts and repairing the areas that those efforts damaged.

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76 Kirst, “Downtown Renaissance”
Appendices

Appendix A: 1958 map of the 15th Ward and surrounding area projects.
Appendix B: 1955 Photo, Annotated, of Western portions of 15th Ward.
Appendix C: Diagram depicting Urban Renewal programs in Syracuse as planned in 1975. Source: Syracuse Community Development First Year Plan February 75
Appendix D: Structure classifications, from *University East Physical Development Plan* (1964)

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