Urban Renewal in New Haven

Curriculum Unit 79.03.06
by Joseph A. Montagna

INTRODUCTION

New Haven was once a national leader among cities in the United States for its efforts in pioneering urban renewal. It is important for our students to study this period to develop a sense of pride in their city, and strive to contribute to making New Haven a better place in which to live. New Haven, as any other urban center, has its problems. Cities are where large numbers of people live and work together—people with differences. Much time and effort has been wasted by utilizing these differences as causes for confrontation, rather than as a means of creating harmony. If people would only see that these differences can complement one another, and not conflict, then we will have taken our first step toward ameliorating life in the city. A city can grow economically, but if its human and social growth does not increase proportionately, society lags and needs are not met. Herein lies the root of the problems of our cities. We, as teachers, must instill in our students the importance of human values, for it is the people, not buildings, that make a city what it is. We must stress the importance of setting goals for a brighter future.

Cities are places that provide people with numerous services, not only to its residents, but to the residents of neighboring cities and towns as well. New Haven’s businesses, colleges, churches and health care facilities provide necessary services to residents of every city and town in the region. Yet, New Haven is made to stand alone to face up to its problems. The problems of our city do not miraculously disappear, however, at the city limits. New Haven’s problems should be addressed on a metropolitan basis. It is important for our students to understand that New Haven’s vitality is crucial to the health of the entire region.

During the period of urban renewal in New Haven, people had their sights set on the future. With the process of rebuilding there was hope for a brighter future. Recently President Carter expressed the view that many Americans believe that the future is expected to be worse than the present. We cannot pass this sense of despair on to our students, for they are the future. I hope that this unit will enable them to understand the importance of their striving to become good, productive people with their sights set on shaping the future for the betterment of all.

One doesn’t have to look only at the recent history of New Haven to find New Haveners who had the desire to make the City a more attractive place in which to live and work. In the period from 1754 to 1784 James Hillhouse, Captain of the Governor’s Guard, Congressman, Senator, and state legislator, planted the City’s elm trees. At the turn of the nineteenth century many improvements were accomplished by the City Beautiful
Movement. While these projects cannot compare in scope to the changes that took place in New Haven in the years from the fifties to the present, they are important to note, for they illustrate the persisting efforts of New Haveners to improve their city.

The urban renewal program in New Haven was undertaken on a massive scale. No other city in the United States could equal the ambitious commitment to such a large scale redevelopment of its business and residential districts. On a per capita basis, New Haven outranked all American cities in securing funds which produced an impressive experiment in the physical and human rejuvenation of a city.

In 1953, when Richard C. Lee was elected Mayor of the City of New Haven, the city was in a devastatingly gloomy condition. Plans were being formulated by former administrations for the beginning of a renewal program, but the future of New Haven appeared to be as gloomy as its appearance. The downtown district was in poor economic and physical condition and large pockets of slums existed throughout the city. Dick Lee had based his campaign on the promise of a brighter future for New Haven. It took the voters three elections to decide that he was ready for the job. It was Lee who was the catalyst of the chemistry of city planning that was about to occur.

Mayor Lee’s relationship with A. Whitney Griswold, President of Yale University, enhanced the City’s efforts in renewal. The City and Yale University worked jointly on several projects. In some situations Yale was the actual developer, and in many instances, the University provided the Lee staff with expertise in such fields as law, city planning, and architecture. A second factor which figured largely in New Haven’s renewal story was the staff that Lee commanded. These were exciting times for those who wished to pursue a career of public service. The atmosphere in New Haven offered greater opportunity than Washington for those who were bright, dedicated, and ambitious. Under the direction of Lee and Edward Logue, his Development Administrator, these “whiz kids” kept the ideas and grant applications flowing through the bureaucratic structure. A third factor was the intent of the federal government in providing funds for urban renewal. In fact, Washington was so receptive to fresh ideas that it was not unusual for representatives from New Haven to aid in the drafting of enabling legislation for programs to which they were prepared to apply. Fourth, Lee enjoyed an excellent relationship with the Democratic Party structure from the local level to the state and national levels. Later, when Abraham Ribicoff was elected Governor of Connecticut and Kennedy was elected President, Lee’s influence increased ten-fold. Finally, Lee refined an idea which pulled together business leaders, community leaders, and representatives of New Haven’s labor force. Notably missing from this committee, however, were representatives of neighborhood people. This becomes a factor of importance as the story unfolds. With Dick Lee at the helm, city planning came of age in New Haven. His drive, foresightedness, and dedication pulled all of these factors together to improve the image of New Haven.

In the years to follow, New Haven was given a facelift.

**Oak Street** — Oak Street was the worst slum area in the city. The area which bordered the downtown district had the distinction of harboring the most decrepit housing in New Haven. The Oak Street Project became the City’s first effort in rebuilding. However, there was the problem of relocating the more than 600 families and businesses that were in this neighborhood. After nearly two years had passed (1955-57), the entire area was leveled and made ready for the Oak Street Connector. The connector was originally planned to be no more than a spur from the Interstate to the downtown district. Lee and his staff drew up plans which called for three exit ramps at various points which would facilitate smoother traffic flow into the city. The highway department was impressed with this alternative plan and accepted it.

**Downtown** — The Oak Street Connector was finally completed in 1959. Its placement was a key factor in the
renewal of the downtown district for it provided easy access to the area. This was important if New Haven was to have any chance at attracting new businesses and investors. Two other factors figured largely in getting the renewal of downtown underway, a large parking garage on Temple Street; and the intention of the First New Haven National Bank to construct a new headquarters on Church Street. Dick Lee and Ed Logue were able to entice Roger L. Stevens, a real estate entrepreneur, into New Haven’s downtown renewal program which became known as the Church Street Project. This enormous section of the business district, which stretched from the Green to the Connector, would ultimately involve the outlay of more than $25,000,000 for the construction of a hotel, office tower, department stores, and a shopping mall. The Church Street Project was not devoid of problems. More than two years of litigation were to follow, in which businessmen who would be dislocated challenged the efforts of the Redevelopment Agency. Three years had passed between Lee’s announcement of the Church Street Project’s approval by the Board of Aldermen and the beginning of construction. Even after construction was underway, the Church Street Project encountered difficulties. The construction of the new Malley’s was temporarily halted until financial arrangements could be settled. Yale University came to the rescue by providing the necessary backing of the Malley’s building. In 1962, Macy’s announced its intention of joining the Church Street Project.

The construction of a five million dollar store by a concern as large as Macy’s practically assured the success of the Church Street Project. Roger L. Stevens had invested a great deal of effort and capital in the rebuilding of New Haven’s business district, but was finally ready to pull out of New Haven. Stevens explained, “We figured that we sank seventeen million dollars into New Haven. That’s more than I spent on the Empire State Building deal. I just got tired of throwing money away.” In 1964, Stevens withdrew as the major developer, but not before securing Gilbane Builders and the Fusco-Amatruda Construction Company as the new developers. These firms would continue with the construction of the hotel, office tower, and shopping mall.

**Wooster Square** —Wooster Square became the first residential neighborhood to be renewed. This area had gone through many changes as the city, the country, and the world had changed. It was first settled by well-to-do Yankees and was a very fashionable district. When the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, many immigrants were attracted to this neighborhood, most of whom were Italians. At the turn of the century the Italian population accounted for five percent of the total neighborhood population. By the end of the 1960s, the Italians numbered about eighty percent of the total population of 7,000. Many rundown tenements, businesses, and factories existed in a “salad bowl” type of configuration. Wooster Square was a challenge to the city planners.

This neighborhood was handled with “kid gloves” by the Redevelopment Agency because of its historic nature. Many of these homes would be rehabilitated rather than razed. The Agency took great pains to instill pride in the owners of these homes. Whenever it was necessary, the Agency used its power of eminent domain to condemn a building that was not up to code. This was done only in cases where the owner refused to cooperate with the plans that were drawn up by the Redevelopment Agency. With properties that had the potential to be rehabilitated, an architect would consult with the owner, draw a rendering of what the property could become, provide technical assistance to the owner; and, to add a personal touch, when the property was rehabilitated, the owner was presented with a certificate by Mayor Lee which documented the owner’s participation in it the renewal of the community. When Wooster Square was completed, it boasted a new community school, library, senior citizens’ center, cooperative housing, rehabilitated businesses, and an industrial park. Wooster Square became a prime example of what a city could do by making the wise use of the “scalpel instead of the bulldozer.”

**Dixwell** —Started in 1961, the University Park - Dixwell Project was vastly different from the Wooster Square
There was no need to make greater use of the scalpel rather than the bulldozer, for there were no historic homes to be saved. More than 700 slum dwellings existed here. These slums were razed to make way for new businesses, churches, and cooperative housing. The greater emphasis was placed on new housing in Dixwell. Unlike Wooster Square which was predominantly white and wanted to stay that way, Dixwell was predominantly black and wanted to attract more whites into the neighborhood. A housing project called Florence Virtue was the first cooperative housing project in Dixwell. It consisted of 129 new units and was sponsored by the Dixwell Congregational Church. Early figures showed that the efforts to attract whites to the project were not in vain. When the project was completed, the occupancy figures reflected a ratio of sixty percent black and forty percent white. Since then additional units of housing and business have been constructed in the Dixwell community.

Long Wharf Originally this area was more than 100 acres of tidal marsh land. As the harbor was being dredged, this material was being used to fill in this marsh land. By the end of the sixties, Long Wharf became a business sector which included a regional food market terminal, Sargent & Company, Armstrong Rubber, Blakeslee Construction Company, Gant Shirt Factory, and a Howard Johnsons Motel. Later, Long Wharf became the home of South Central Community College, Albie Booth Boys’ Club, a community clinic, a branch of the First Bank, and the New Haven Water Company.

The New Haven Redevelopment has a wealth of free material concerning projects of more recent years, and updated material on past projects. Renewal projects that are in progress, or are planned, in areas such as the Hill, Newhallville, Dwight, State Street, and Fair Haven are at various stages. Materials such as maps, housing figures, racial composition of neighborhoods, progress reports, etc. will provide the teacher with a myriad of applications in the classroom. In addition, separate units on several of the neighborhoods of New Haven have been developed by other Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. Both sources of information will prove to be invaluable to the teacher in presenting an in-depth unit on New Haven’s redevelopment.

HUMAN RENEWAL

From 1953 to 1958 the Urban Renewal Program in New Haven concentrated on the physical aspects of revitalization. This was about to change, for there was a need to address the problems that affected the people of the City’s neighborhoods. Mayor Lee and his staff were thinking in terms of people programs as a means of a holistic approach to urban renewal. Dick Lee and his staff were making efforts in this area, but they were meager ones. What was needed was an enormous pool of resources to combat the problems of those who lived in the city. Lee encouraged the labor unions to open their ranks to minorities because jobs were central to the improvement of the human condition. Small programs in homemaking and job training were developed. The election of John Kennedy gave credibility to programs designed to improve the human condition. As soon as people programs became nationally prominent, New Haven was among the first to capitalize on it. When the federal government began to call for research and demonstration programs in the area of human renewal, there was New Haven at the head of the line with a “bushel basket”.

At the hub of New Haven’s human renewal efforts was Community Progress, Inc. (C.P.I.). It served as an umbrella organization which coordinated the flow of funds to neighborhood corporations for their projects. A report entitled “Opening Opportunities” captured the philosophy of C.P.I. This report became the guiding light for programs in education, employment, leisure time activities, community services, juvenile delinquency, housing, and services for the elderly.
Not only should “Opening Opportunities” have been the philosophy of C.P.I. and New Haven, but it should be the goal of every civilization on this planet. The report embraced the idea of the development of the individual to his/her fullest potential. Mayor Lee wrote in the preface:

We in New Haven believe that the goal of a democratic society is the fullest possible development of the individual potentialities of all its people. In Urban America, despite great material wealth, there are obstacles to this goal. Most visible are the blight and obsolescence of the environment of a large portion of all but the newest cities. Equally present are social, cultural, and economic obstructions which prevent people from attaining a full measure of personal fulfillment.2

The steps that were about to be taken in tackling the human problems of New Haven were courageous ones, for they attacked a way of life that people tended to accept: racism, high unemployment of the poor, crime, poor educational facilities, etc. Now, a mechanism was developed to address these problems that had been festering for too long.

“Opening Opportunities” outlined the conceptual basis of the programs that were initially developed. The report put the individual as the focus of these programs, offering opportunities to raise horizons, develop innate talents, and break down the barriers to advancement that existed. These programs were important to the poor, for they provided a way of breaking the vicious cycle which held them captive.

Did these programs succeed? Did they go far enough? One finds that the answers to these questions vary depending on whom one asks. What definition of success might we apply? Neighborhood people were being provided with services that were badly needed. Excellent starts were made in providing the poor with badly needed services such as job training centers and day care centers. The former provided a person with a marketable skill to become employable and the latter provided a parent with the opportunity to become employed. That’s success! Community Schools were being developed, providing the community with services from morning to night. That’s success! People were participating in cooperative neighborhood activities. That’s success! The elderly were being provided with services and housing. That’s success!

There were many critics of Community Progress, Inc. and their criticisms took many forms. There were those who questioned the enormous administrative costs; Congressman Giaimo among the most prominent. He likened the structure of C.P.I. to an “inverted pyramid” which resulted in money being spent at the top of the organization, rather than it being directly applied to the neighborhoods. There were those motivated by racism or ignorance, or both, who questioned the very existence of such programs in the first place. At the other end of the spectrum were those neighborhood people who contended that the programs did not go far enough. Finally, there was the criticism that the system did not allow for greater participation in the decision making process by those affected by these programs, the people who lived in the neighborhoods.

The handwriting was on the wall about the flow of federal funds for these programs. President Johnson was disenchanted with the War on Poverty, as well as the war in Vietnam. The political climate of the country was one which turned attention away from the problems of the poor. The New Haven “riots” of the summer of ‘67 were interpreted as a failure of these programs to help those living in the inner city. Looking at events from the other end of the microscope, people saw the pendulum swing from one extreme to the other. They saw the federal government shift from a great deal of interest in the plight of the poor to little or no interest at all. To put the “riots” in their proper perspective, they were merely a manifestation of the frustration created by this shift of interest in the problems of urban areas by the federal government. Surely, it cannot be disputed that those engaged in violence during those two days were a minority of the total neighborhood population where the incidents occurred. However, political leaders failed to recognize that this minority was actually the
voice of the majority of the poor. Mitchell Sviridoff, former head of C.P.I., maintained that the “radical element” must be consulted in order to keep one’s finger on the pulse of the community. Perhaps, if this had been done, then New Haven would not have had to experience those tense summer nights.

What of the future? It has been said that those who do not learn from the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat those same mistakes. Nobody can question the goals that were developed for dealing with the problems of New Haven. One can only grieve that these ideals were not achieved, and hope that the future will bring another wave which will pick up where past teachers left off. This time we will not be embarking upon an unexplored frontier. We hope that we will learn from the mistakes that were made.

Notes


2 Powledge, Model City, p. 39.

Teacher’s Bibliography


The New Haven Register

Harper’s Magazine

Student’s Bibliography

The New Haven Register

Harper's Magazine

The purpose of this unit is to provide the student with a broad understanding of the social, economic, and political aspects of the Urban Renewal Program in New Haven. Further, the unit should convey a knowledge that is transferable to any large scale public project which affects as large a segment of the population, as did
New Haven's program.

The lessons are not designed to be a cookbook. The teacher is provided with suggested lesson outlines which may or not be suited to his/her needs. It is the responsibility of the teacher to decide which objectives are relevant to the classes he/she teaches, and gear them to the levels of the individual students. Discussions are suggested extensively throughout the course of study of this unit. These discussion groups will enable the students to develop the skill of expressing one’s ideas on a particular reading or topic. The use of role-playing situations is encouraged to make the discussions “come alive.”

The level of competence that will be achieved by individual students will depend wholly on the individual student’s abilities and interests. It is the teacher’s responsibility to recognize the differences that exist among students, and to provide individualized experiences to meet the individual needs. Therefore, it is suggested that the highly motivated students be contracted to do more than the minimal requirements of the course of study. This may take the form of doing research on a particular topic, constructing a project, writing, art, etc. One manner of keeping records on such individualized assignments is a point system. The student should have a short conference with the teacher when he/she has some idea as to the type of assignment he/she would like to tackle. The student and teacher should come to a mutual agreement on the type of assignment, length of time that is required to complete the assignment, and the number of points that the student could earn.

The unit is quite flexible. The teacher may make use of the lessons in a fashion that suits his/her techniques. The teacher should become familiar with the material covered by the books in the bibliography. Talbot’s book, *The Mayor’s Game*, is one which should be read thoroughly. There is one aspect of this unit that is quite inflexible, vocabulary development. If every student is going to participate in the lessons with any kind of confidence, he/she must first understand the terms that are central to the discussions or lessons. An outline of the procedure that should be used for vocabulary development follows in the next section.

Many of the materials that are suggested throughout this unit are available through the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, or at the New Haven Redevelopment Agency.

The lessons that are outlined are merely a skeleton of this unit. It is up to the teacher to assign other homework assignments, individual projects, and small group projects as he/she deems necessary. There are limitless opportunities for assignments in creative writing, art, poetry, research, math, reading, etc. For instance, the New Haven Redevelopment Agency has numerous charts concerning population figures for each neighborhood, racial composition, etc. Many mathematics problems can be assigned as a means of integrating math into this unit. The only limit is one’s own creativity. Further, a list of magazine articles pertaining to New Haven is available for this unit. The teacher may easily obtain these articles at the YNHTI. They may be applied on a large class basis, or may be individually contracted for a grade. Also, Sterling Library and the New Haven Public Library have *The New Haven Register* on microfilm. Articles covering the period of this unit may be obtained for similar use.
The most expedient method of assigning new words to students is to have them look up the word in the dictionary and copy the definition. This method negates any conscious learning on the student’s part. What we want to accomplish is to have the student to make these new terms a part of his/her working vocabulary. The following method has gotten good results:

1st Day - (15 minutes) Introduce the new list of terms. Introduction should involve pronunciation and discussion of students’ recognition of any of these words. The teacher should provide no assistance in defining these words at this time.
Assign homework: (Due 2nd Day)
1. Make two lists of the new words, one in cursive, and the other in manuscript.
2. Locate each word in the dictionary or encyclopedia. Read the definitions of each word. Decide which definition fits the context of the unit.
3. Rewrite the correct definition in your own words.
2nd Day - (45 minutes)
Discuss the meaning of each term that was assigned the day before. Make sure the definitions fit the context. Students should correct any errors they may have on their homework.
Assign homework: (Due 3rd Day)
1. Correct any errors that were made on previous homework.
2. Write a sentence for each term that demonstrates your understanding of the meaning of the term.
3. Make a chart which includes phonetic spelling and base words.
3rd Day
1. Collect all vocabulary assignments.
2. Correct and return them.

All work that is returned must be kept in a separate section of a loose leaf binder for the duration of the unit. A
grade will be given on these at the end of each marking period.

**THE LESSONS**

Before beginning the unit, it is necessary for the teacher to assess the level of mastery of each student concerning certain basic facts about New Haven, i.e. location, surrounding cities and towns, major waterways, etc. It is necessary for each student to attain these skills to make the course of study of this unit a meaningful experience.

On an outline map of Connecticut should be able to locate the following:

New Haven
Quinnipiac River
Neighboring Towns and Cities
Hartford
Connecticut River
Bridgeport
Long Island Sound

The teacher should prepare individual or class lessons for those students who are below level.

The following schedule is only a guide. The teacher may choose to take two days to complete a lesson which calls for one day.

*Day one* Involve the students in a discussion concerning the operation of a city. Draw from them any thoughts they may have on this subject. The New Haven Redevelopment Agency has a handbook entitled, “A Handbook On City Government and Services.” Use this handbook as a guide to explain the governmental structure in New Haven.

**Vocabulary**

mayor
alderman
finance
ward
election
voter
legislation
Day Two: Vocabulary development

Day Three: Obtain a large map of the City of New Haven from the Redevelopment Agency. (They have one which is approximately 2’ x 3’, which is durable enough to last throughout the course of the unit.) Discuss the students concepts of the differences between: city, state, neighborhood, community. Locate the various communities that exist in New Haven.

Vocabulary

city
state
neighborhood
community

Day Four Continue with previous discussion of the meanings of the terms that were assigned for homework. Play a game involving the location of particular neighborhoods, streets, landmarks. Locate your school. Future project: locate the homes of individual students.

Day Five Present the material related to the condition of New Haven before the renewal era. (see narrative, Mayor’s Game.) Locate the major concerns at the beginning of this time frame; Oak Street, Church Street Project, Wooster Square, Dixwell.

Day Six Continue with presentation of material concerning New Haven’s pre-redevelopment era. Play the tape of interview with former Mayor Lee. Discuss the thoughts that develop concerning the interview.

Vocabulary

slum
business
residential
renewal
urban
inner-city
ghetto
renovate

Days Seven and Eight: Show slides of the downtown district before renewal. Encourage students to take notes on what they view. Discuss the things that they observed in the slides. View the slides again. Obtain the slides which depict construction of new facilities in the downtown.
district. Discuss the need for renewing this area. Touch on the economics involved in financing these projects (public and private).

Vocabulary
federal government
Department of Housing and Urban Development
urban blight
urban flight
taxes

Day Eight Review vocabulary. Discuss Mayor Lee, Edward Logue, the “whiz kids”, Citizens Action Committee. (see narrative and Talbot’s book.) Present this material to give a flavor of the attitude of the times to renew this country’s cities.

Day Nine Construct a chart which lists the things that a city has to offer. Keep this available to add new items on it during the course of study. Items may range from telephone poles to mass transit. List everything that is offered.

Day Ten Start the discussion off with the topic: “The City Is The People”. Bring into the discussion the interaction of thousands of people and the activities in which they are involved. List these activities. Creative Writing Assignment: “The City Has Soul.”

Days Eleven Twenty five: Spend two days on each of the seven neighborhoods in New Haven. Discussion should concern location of each, racial composition, housing conditions, economic conditions, etc. The New Haven Redevelopment Agency has material concerning all of the above. Show slides of before and after of each neighborhood. One could spend considerably more time on each neighborhood. In fact, entire units have been written on several of them. These units may be obtained at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute.

Days Twenty-six and Twenty-seven Topic for discussion: “People Problems.” Discuss the problems of those who live in the city. List them. Bring into the discussion the interest of the federal government in the problems of the city and its poor. Discuss John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, the War on Poverty. Discuss the programs that grew from the efforts of the above.

Day Twenty-eight Obtain a copy of “Opening Opportunities” (see narrative). Present the philosophy involved concerning education, leisure time activities, employment training, juvenile delinquency, the elderly, etc. Discuss the programs that grew out of “Opening Opportunities.”

Day Twenty-nine If at all possible, obtain a bus for a trip around the city as a culminating activity.

Day Thirty Discuss the future of our city. This will undoubtedly be a discussion that will raise more questions than answers.
Suggested Activities

*Creative Writing*

“My City Has Soul”

“The Most Magnificent Playground In The World Is In My Neighborhood”

“I’m The Mayor”

“The City Of The Future”

“The School Of The Future”

“My Neighborhood Is. . .”

*Small Group/Individual Projects*

Map Making

Cardboard Building Construction

Design A Playground

Interview A Neighborhood Person (class could develop an interview form and practice interviewing skills)

Design A City

*Math*

Graph Making (pictorial, line, bar)

Percentages

Basic Operations Problems

*Biography*

Richard C. Lee

John F. Kennedy

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lyndon B. Johnson

Abraham Ribicoff

*Language Arts*
Obtain copies of news articles from magazines and newspapers which cover New Haven’s redevelopment period. These are available at Sterling Memorial Library. Prepare comprehension questions for individuals, small groups, or whole class.